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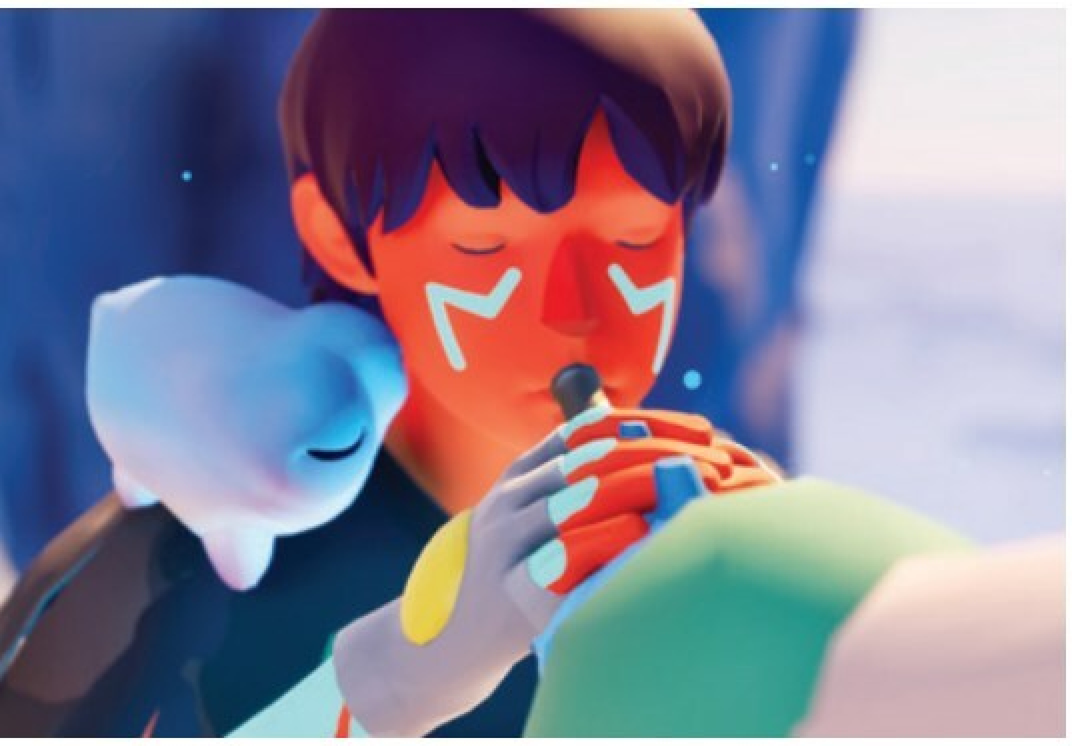
EDITOR'S NOTE

TO EACH THEIR OWN



MATT MILLER
Editor-In-Chief

AS 2023 COMES TO A CLOSE, we celebrate the year with a sweeping look back over the last 12 months – our attempt to synthesize the best releases in the gaming hobby. It's a ton of work to pull together all the award entries you'll see spread across this issue (starting on p. 44), but one of the things I enjoy the most is the part you don't see – the conversations that lead each winner, ranking, and editor pick.

While the written sentiments have to eventually be squeezed down to fit into the pages of a magazine issue, our end-of-year selections arise from hours and hours of debate and good-natured argument for our team, where we talk through the merits and relative values of hundreds of games, trying to whittle down to the comparatively small number we can include in our recommendations.

How does a given game stand out in a crowded genre? What makes something a good role-playing game versus a good action game? How did a particular title elevate and advance the form? Is there a hard-to-avoid recency bias that must be considered between games from early in the year versus those that arrived later? Is the "Best Dork" award a term of endearment or a scathing indictment?

If I'm honest, it's that kind of rigorous but fun engagement with games as an art form and form of expression that first attracted me to a career writing about them. I've always loved to play games, but I also love to talk about games with others who share my enthusiasm. And if you're reading this magazine right now, I suspect you may be in the same camp.

Everyone has their own tastes, and it's fascinating for me to hear our staff members articulate an ecstatic defense of a game that I'd dismissed because it didn't fit my taste. Likewise, I love that we try to involve you and all the other *Game Informer* readers through our reader vote (p. 52), where we gain insight into how our staff aligns or differs from a much broader group of players.

Games deserve that kind of scrutiny, and the thousands of developers worldwide who devote their careers to their creation deserve to have their hard work examined for all the complexity and nuance each title brings.

As noted in our Year in Review (p. 8), it was a brutally tough year for many of those industry professionals as they faced unprecedented layoffs across numerous studios. Incongruously, it was also an outstanding year for game releases, and the games that snagged our awards had tough competition.

I hope you'll enjoy our look at the games of 2023, and we look forward to seeing you back in 2024!

Play well. Be well.

GAMEINFORMER

FINAL FANTASY VII REBIRTH

For this month's cover story, we traveled to Tokyo, Japan to visit Square Enix, see new sections of Final Fantasy VII Rebirth and speak to the legendary developers behind it. This issue's cover art, designed in part by Square Enix's Tetsuya Nomura, features a fiery image of Sephiroth on the front and the profile of a determined Cloud Strife across the back.

GAMEINFORMER

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Probably doesn't have a secret superhero identity

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Cut her hair with bangs and feels like a different person

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STAFF SPOTLIGHT

Margaret Andrews

Production Director

It's the end of the year, which means I'm reviewing the many lists I scribbled about my favorite and most memorable books of 2023. Coming in hot as the book that lived up to the hype: *Fourth Wing*. Is it the best book of the year? Probably not, but it has dragons and adventure, and almost everyone I know has read it, which is pretty impressive. A few other favorites: *Daisy Jones & The Six* (historical fiction and Fleetwood Mac adjacent), Carissa Broadbent (author), *Emily Wilde's Encyclopaedia of Faeries* (unexpected and heartwarming), *Graceling* (fantasy), and *Tomorrow and Tomorrow and Tomorrow* (best book I haven't read yet but definitely will by Dec. 31st).

Wesley LeBlanc

Associate Editor

After falling in love with Assassin's Creed II in 2009 and obsessing over the Italian Renaissance's art, historical figures, and symbology in the 14 years since I finally visited the cities of Florence and Venice. I dreamed of visiting these cities for years, and it was surreal to explore what I had intricately come to know through the eyes of Ezio. Let video games inspire your travels sometimes – it's worth it and sure to provide a unique experience and perspective.

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We traveled to Square Enix in Japan to play the highly anticipated second part of its Final Fantasy VII remake and spoke with the team about what to expect from Rebirth.

10 **THE ART OF CREDITS**

Marvel's Spider-Man 2 was one of our favorite games of the year, but one under-discussed and undeniably cool part of the game is its end credits. We spoke with the team Insomniac brought on to make sure the game left a lasting impression.

28 **PRINCE OF PERSIA: THE LOST CROWN**

After nearly 13 years, the Prince of Persia franchise is finally making its triumphant return. We spent over three hours with the game and asked Ubisoft Montpellier why it took so long to bring the series back.

34 **REMAKING RIVEN**

The video game industry is no stranger to remakes. Getting a chance to play the game you loved when you were young in a new light is an undeniable joy. Even still, Riven, the sequel to Myst, is an unexpected candidate for the treatment.

44 **THE BEST AND BRIGHTEST OF 2023**

Along with naming our top 10 games of 2023 (an extra difficult task this year), we did our best (as we do every year) to highlight all our favorite games and things in games across one massive, 24-page feature. Read on to learn about the greatest the year had to offer.

regulars

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STAR WARS HERITAGE PACK
7 CLASSIC GAMES
aspyr

DISCOVER NEW GAMES

PS5
Shadows over Loathing
Serenity Forge
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS4 NINTENDO SWITCH

NINTENDO SWITCH
UNDER NIGHT IN-BIRTH [Sys:Celes]
ALSO AVAILABLE FOR PS5 PS4

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FLASHBACK 2
LIMITED EDITION
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Replies

DOES REMAKING GREATNESS EQUAL GREATNESS?

Resident Evil 4 (Remake) was nominated for Game of the Year at The Game Awards, and I couldn't be happier. I love that game and have gone through it multiple times already. Yet, it appears a few people weren't too happy about a remake being nominated. Do you think a remake deserves to be nominated for such a prestigious award? **– mrstooge via email**

↳ *A common complaint each new console generation is about how many remasters we receive. Even today, years into every major console, we still receive multiple high-profile remasters each year. But remakes are a different beast all together. While remasters, by definition, remain extremely loyal to the original game, often offering a boost in fidelity, updated control schemes, and maybe some bonus content, remakes usually rebuild the game from the ground up. In 2023, we received stellar remakes of Dead Space and, as you mentioned, Resident Evil 4. These games make significant changes to the already beloved games to make them feel like all-new titles that first launched in the modern era. While the stories and core concepts explored in the games aren't new, the rest of those experiences might as well be, which is why Resident Evil 4 landed on* Game Informer*'s list of the top 10 games of 2023 (p. 44).*

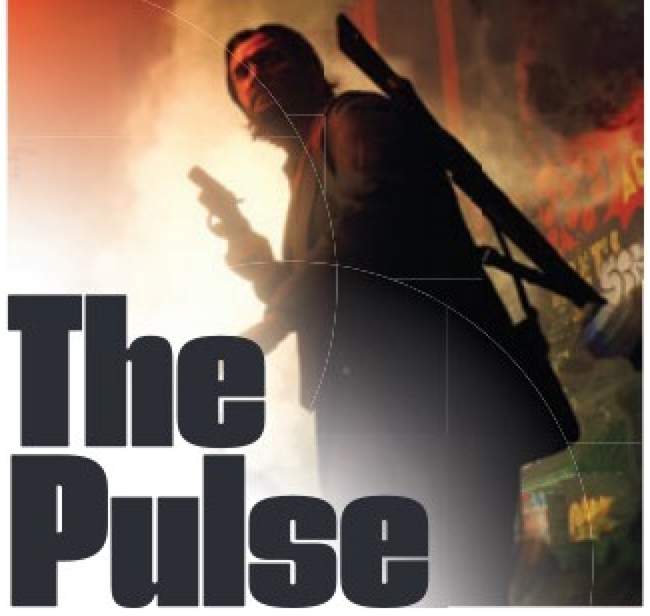
The same could be said for the game on the cover of the issue you're reading this very moment, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth. Final Fantasy VII Remake is another example of a remake of a past game that landed on our top 10 list for the year it came out (2020), and Rebirth is a game that immediately comes to mind as one of our most anticipated games of 2024 (read more on p. 16). While it may be a tough sell for some people to accept a remake being honored as a nominee for the best game of a really strong year, if the remake is particularly excellent, as all the ones we mentioned are, we have no problem acknowledging it. And it would appear we're not alone, seeing as how The Game Awards' nominations are decided by a panel of media outlets (including Game Informer*).*

NOT ABOUT OBLIGATION

I quite enjoyed Kyle Hilliard's recent article on experiences vs. obligations (Issue 358). While I enjoy some free-to-play live service games, or rather put up with those elements due to loving other parts of them, his point resonated deeply with me. Jusant comes to mind as a recent game that focused on a single crescendo of an experience, and I found myself deeply moved by it. A big thank you to Alex Van Aken for the recommendation on *The Game Informer Show* podcasts. **– Jherb24 via Discord**

↳ *The internet has opened the doors to amazing experiences in gaming that just weren't possible in eras past, but as with many things, it can be a double-edged sword. Yes, developers can patch glitches in games, but they can also rely too heavily on that in the name of getting a less-than-polished product out the door. Similarly, they can extend amazing experiences using DLC, but some games take it too far and shoehorn in a live-service roadmap where the game probably would have benefited from being a self-contained experience.*

For every successful live-service game like Destiny or Fortnite, there are multiple failed attempts. Some even feel like the live-service elements detract from the experience; look no further than games like Anthem or Marvel's Avengers. Those titles would have almost certainly been better received had they just focused on giving players straightforward, curated experiences rather than trying to entice people to come back to play over a long period of time. Looking at our top 10 games from 2023 (p. 44), 9 of them are self-contained experiences, with Street Fighter 6 being the only game that has a live-service plan beyond scattered DLC drops. That's not to say we hate live-service games – in fact, most Game Informer *editors have one or two they play regularly – but when we think of our most memorable and favorite games of all time, most of the titles that come to mind are contained experiences.*



The Pulse

We asked the community what it's been playing over the last month and have compiled power rankings of the current hottest games among our readers.

1. Persona 5 Tactica NEW RELEASE
2. Alan Wake 2
3. Marvel's Spider-Man 2 ▼
4. Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora NEW RELEASE
5. Street Fighter 6 ▲
6. Super Mario RPG NEW RELEASE
7. God of War Ragnarök ▲
8. Dead Space ▲
9. Super Mario Bros. Wonder ▼
10. Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3 ▼

Soundoff:

We asked our readers and community to share their selection for Game of the Year 2023. Here are some of their responses!

Game of the Year is Baldur's Gate 3. Fantastic world, story, and voice casting. You could put 200 hours into this game and it would all be worth it. . **– thefountain73 via email**

I would like The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom to win. This game has done a great job by creating its wonderful mechanisms like Ultrahand and it has done a great service to open-world games by creating a vast world and the freedom it gave players. **– via Instagram**

Without any hesitation, Final Fantasy XVI! Excellent game with amazing graphics, gameplay, and music, along with a terrific story. Love it! Spider-Man 2 is a good second. **– via Instagram**

Sea of Stars is my Game of the Year. The battle system was engaging, the story was fun (especially if you played The Messenger), the sprite art was gorgeous, and the exploration was tons of fun. I'm not the biggest turn-based fan, but this one hooked me from the beginning! **– via Twitter**

For more opinions on the best games of 2023 from our community and readers, head to the results of our annual Reader Vote on p. 52

↓
Join the conversation

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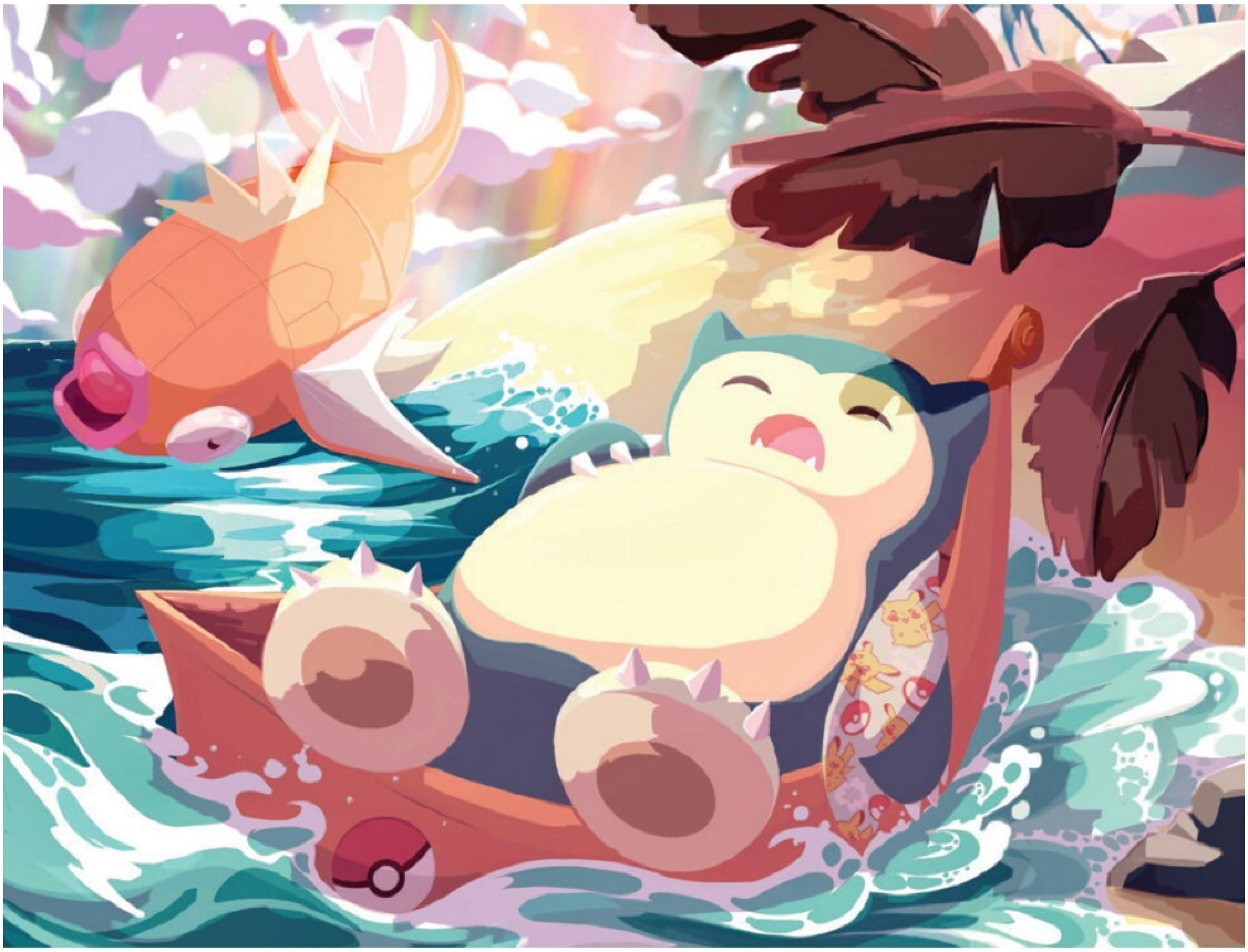

Reader art winner: Tilly Valentine

↘
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2023

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

A great time to be a gamer but a rough time to be a developer

BY CHARLES HARTE

2023 IS ONE OF THE MOST SIGNIFICANT YEARS IN GAMING IN A LONG TIME. From its incredible highs to its tragic lows, we'll be feeling the effects of this year for a long time and reflecting on it even longer. Let's break down exactly why that is.

THE BEST OF TIMES

The past 12 months have been densely packed with some of the best games in years. Whether it's all-time Nintendo greats like Mario and Zelda, franchise tie-ins like Star Wars and Spider-Man, or long-running RPGs like Final Fantasy and Diablo, this year kept us well-entertained. Our picks for the top games of the year (which you can read more about on p. 44) were extremely competitive, and many games that didn't even make our top 10 would be shoo-ins in other years.

As new games are released, older ones are removed from the market. 2023 saw the closure of the Wii U and 3DS eShops and the Xbox 360 store, while the short-lived Google Stadia was discontinued altogether. This renders some older games completely unavailable for purchase, leaving many gamers understandably concerned about the industry's increased focus on digital-only releases. The newest Xbox and PlayStation models both have digital-only options and even some big new games, like Alan Wake 2, skipped physical versions altogether.

Video games have also percolated further into the rest of pop culture, especially Hollywood. Early in the year, *The Last of Us*, starring Pedro Pascal and Bella Ramsey, premiered on HBO to widespread critical acclaim and 24 Emmy nominations. Meanwhile, *The Super Mario Bros. Movie* from Illumination was one of the biggest box office hits of the year, raking in over $1.3 billion internationally. Nintendo has been nothing but encouraged by these numbers, announcing that a live-action Zelda movie is in the works in early November.

The biggest individual story of the year is Microsoft's $68.7 billion deal to acquire Activision-Blizzard. The merger was the largest purchase in video game history and a story we've been covering for years. After legal drama in several countries, a trial with the FTC, and the leaking of hundreds of internal Xbox documents (including concept art for new consoles), Microsoft emerged on the other side of the conflicts victorious. The gaming giant is now even bigger than before, owning many of the biggest franchises in the industry, from Call of Duty to Overwatch to Candy Crush.

THE WORST OF TIMES

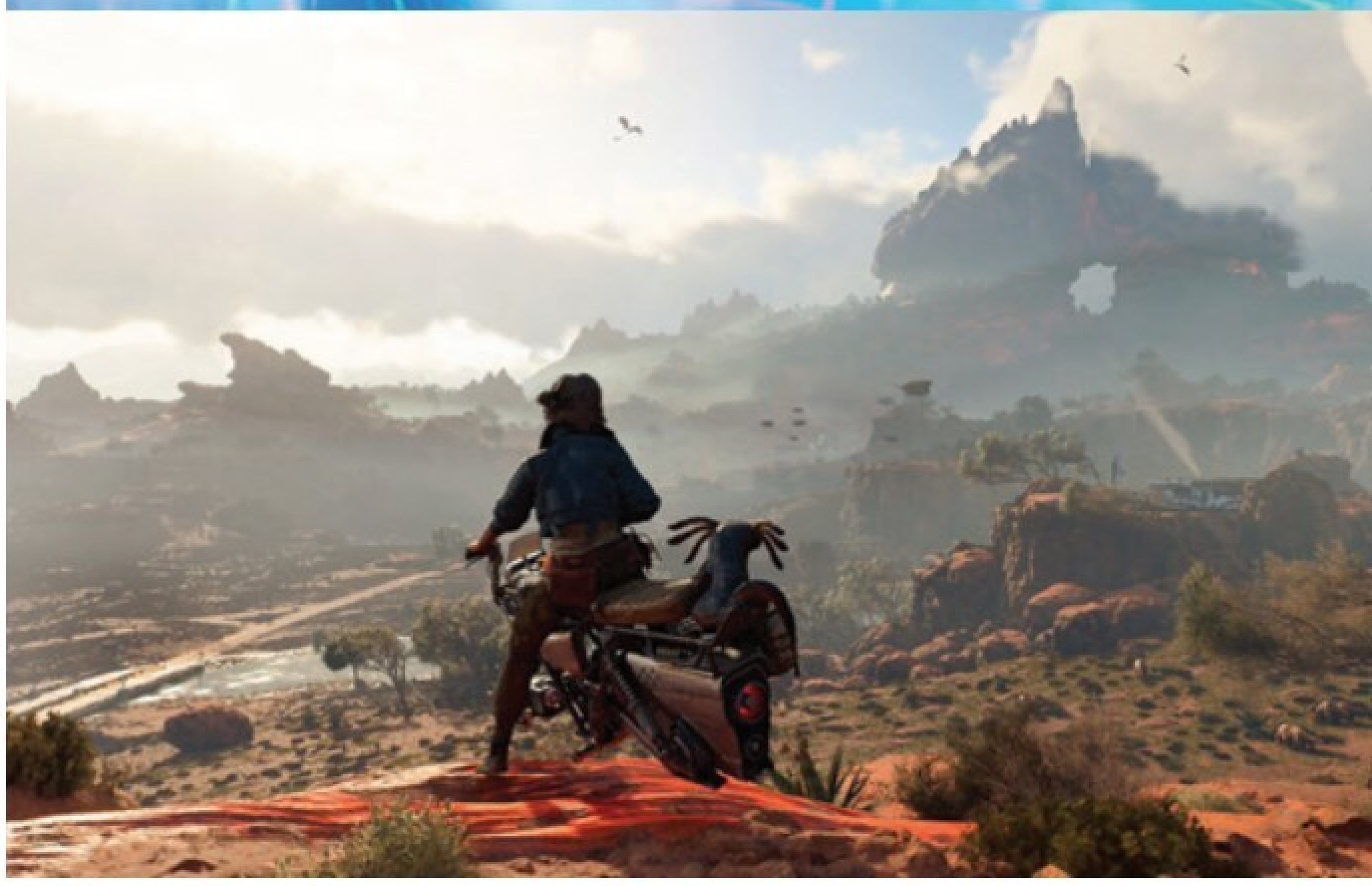
It would be irresponsible to talk about the gaming industry this year without addressing the enormous wave of layoffs the sector has suffered. BioWare, Telltale, Team17, Media Molecule, Unity, Epic Games, Firaxis, Riot Games, Blizzard, Niantic, Digital Extremes, and Naughty Dog are just the start of the list. Ascendant Studios and Striking Distance, two relatively young studios, each also suffered layoffs after their debut games performed below expectations. Microsoft alone laid off a staggering 10,000 people, and while not all of them worked in games, employees who worked at Bethesda, 343 Industries, and The Coalition were all affected. Volition Games, known for Saints Row and Red Faction, was shut down entirely. It's been so tumultuous that in the time between starting and finishing this article, Ubisoft, Amazon, and Bungie all issued layoffs, too.

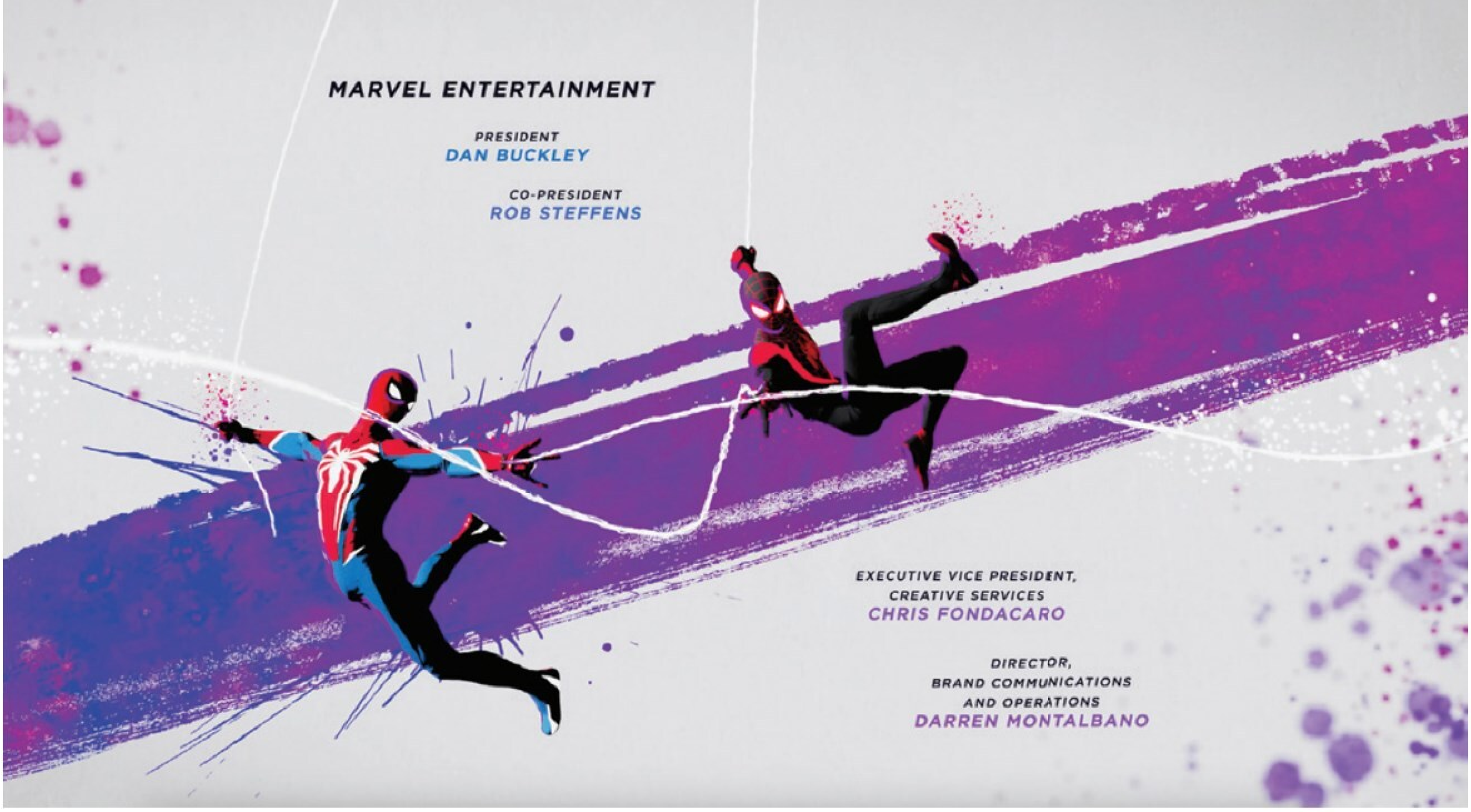
From the outside, 2023 has been one of the best years for games of all time, but from the inside, it's been bleak. Regardless of the reasoning provided by companies and CEOs, it's odd that in a year of record-setting mergers and billion-dollar blockbuster adaptations, people are losing jobs at an overwhelming rate. At the very least, it's uncomfortable to engage in game of the year discussions when so many people that worked on those games are entering the holiday season jobless.

Corporations don't make video games; people do. Designers, directors, accessibility consultants, software engineers, voice actors, writers, producers, QA testers, composers, community managers, and so much more. Video games are the products of years and years of coordinated, difficult work, and while the orders might come from people at the top, we owe most of our thanks to everyone else. Later on in this issue, where we commend the best games of the year, remember that it is not a celebration of corporations; it is a celebration of art and the people who made it. The staff at *Game Informer* sends its collective heart out to everyone who lost their job in 2023, and we hope they're able to land on their feet.

WHAT'S NEXT?

2024 will undoubtedly be slower than 2023, but there's still plenty to look forward to. The first half of the year is full of exciting releases like Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League and Final Fantasy VII Rebirth. A Fallout TV series comes to Amazon Prime in April and a Borderlands arrives on the big screen in August. And hopefully, the layoffs will die down and the people affected by them will find new positions. We'll have to wait and see – here's to 2024. ■





The Art of Credits

How a 10-person team at Perception created the vibrant endcap to Marvel's Spider-Man 2

BY WESLEY LEBLANC

Avengers: Endgame highlighted its various heroes and actor counterparts in a flashy and fittingly memorable end credits sequence. The team behind those credits, Perception, is no stranger to Marvel, having worked on more than a dozen of its cinematic universe projects.

You can see its latest work in *The Marvels*, which hit theaters last month, as Perception is responsible for its title sequence and some U.I. and holographic elements throughout the movie. But just a few weeks before, millions of players watched Perception's work play out in splashy, fluid sequences capping off Marvel's Spider-Man 2 on PlayStation 5.

"Insomniac came to us not at the suggestion of Marvel, but because of our history working on certain films," Perception director of production Eric Daly tells me, noting the studio saw its work on the Tom Holland-led *Spider-Man* movies. "We had lived in that Spider-Man universe, and the producers had seen our title work, even outside of *Spider-Man*, and said, 'We'd love to bring you in and we think you could do something interesting.'"

That conversation began roughly six months before Marvel's Spider-Man 2 shipped in October. Insomniac had a vision in mind, and after a pitch process Perception chief creative director Doug Appleton describes as very collaborative, the team landed on what's in the game today. The credits are flashy, reminiscent of paint on a blank comic book page, and highlight the characters more than anything else.

"They asked us to play with these themes of Venom and the symbiote and these three key words: infestation, transformation, and liberation," Appleton says. The symbiote infests you, it transforms you, and then you break free, and short of spoiling the game, that's a major theme throughout.

Daly says with those keywords in mind, Perception landed on the idea of ink and paint. "We could represent Venom with a very inky, underwater tendril-y look and all of our good guys and heroes with paint and splashes of it," he says. "In talking with Insomniac and PlayStation, we knew people were going to play this game for 20 to 30 hours and we didn't want the end credits to be more of what the game was. We wanted something special that highlighted the characters and not the environments, because the characters are the core of the gameplay and the story, [...] while creating our own style."

The most significant difference between Marvel's Spider-Man 2 and the various movies Perception has worked on is time. With a film or TV show, a production can allow Perception to watch a near-finished product or even something early in its lifecycle to know how to shape the end credits. With Marvel's Spider-Man 2, ensuring the 10 people who worked on its credits had played the entire game wasn't possible. Plus, a movie's end credit sequence, not including the standard rolling black screen of names, typically runs two and a half minutes, according to Appleton; Marvel's Spider-Man 2's is over twice as long.

A film's end credits typically take Perception three months to complete, but Marvel's Spider-Man 2 took four to five, and Appleton says while it had more time for the game, it wasn't equal to the additional work compared to a movie. It had to reshape how it worked with that time constraint in mind, coming up with new ways to approach the sequence. In a movie, changing a name out of 30 that might appear in flashy, Perception-created end credits is a breeze – it affects just 29 others. But with over 800 in Marvel's Spider-Man 2, changing one name can throw off the placement of 799 others, so the team created a new rendering system to ease this burden.

With such a drastic difference in length, Perception focused on keeping the sequence engaging. One scene starts zoomed in on Spider-Man's hand. Then, the camera pulls back to reveal Peter Parker and Miles Morales. And finally, the camera pulls back again to show they're fighting Sandman. "We had to find ways to still have roughly 30-something shots but make it last five and a half minutes," Appleton says.

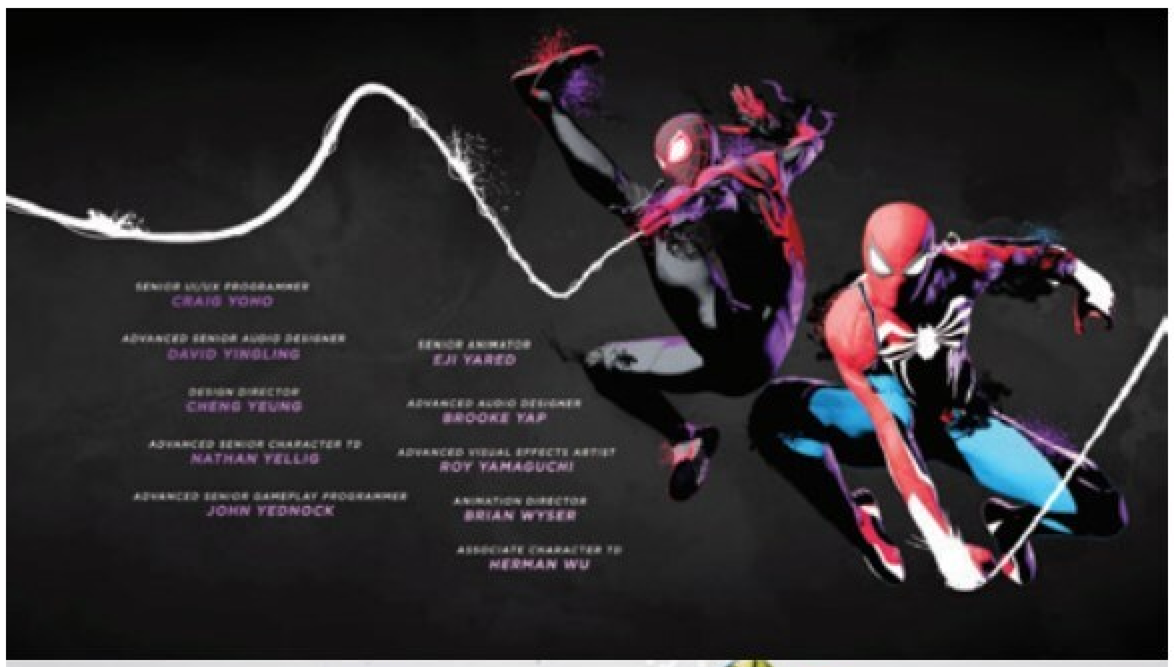
What plays on screen is tonally different from the rest of Marvel's Spider-Man 2, which Daly says was intentional to give players something dynamic to watch and enjoy while credits rolled. "The sequence is very hopeful and bright and vibrant, and that's the world of this Spider-Man," Appleton adds.

While the final product is completely digital, Perception tries to approach design from a tangible place as much as possible. For the *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* end credits, it burned real fabrics and materials like wood as a foundation for what it would then do on computers in programs like After Effects and Cinema 4D. For Marvel's Spider-Man 2, instead of spending hours rendering ink dropping into water and capturing the resulting swirls to apply to Venom, it filmed some genuine ink dropping into water. "We want to get our hands dirty as much as we can," Appleton says.

While Appleton and Daly aren't naive to the fact that Marvel has popularized sitting through credits to reach the stinger scene at the end of movies, TV shows, and even in games – Marvel's Spider-Man 2 features two post-credit scenes – they aim to make something enjoyable and memorable. "They have to sit there for [5.5 minutes] of credits; I want it to be something that is not just, 'Oh, let's get through this to see the thing,'" Appleton says.

"I'm very biased, but it's very much [...] a part of the movie or game or TV; it's not filler." Daly adds, "We want to make something that we want to watch."

Ultimately, he hopes people ignore the skip button. ■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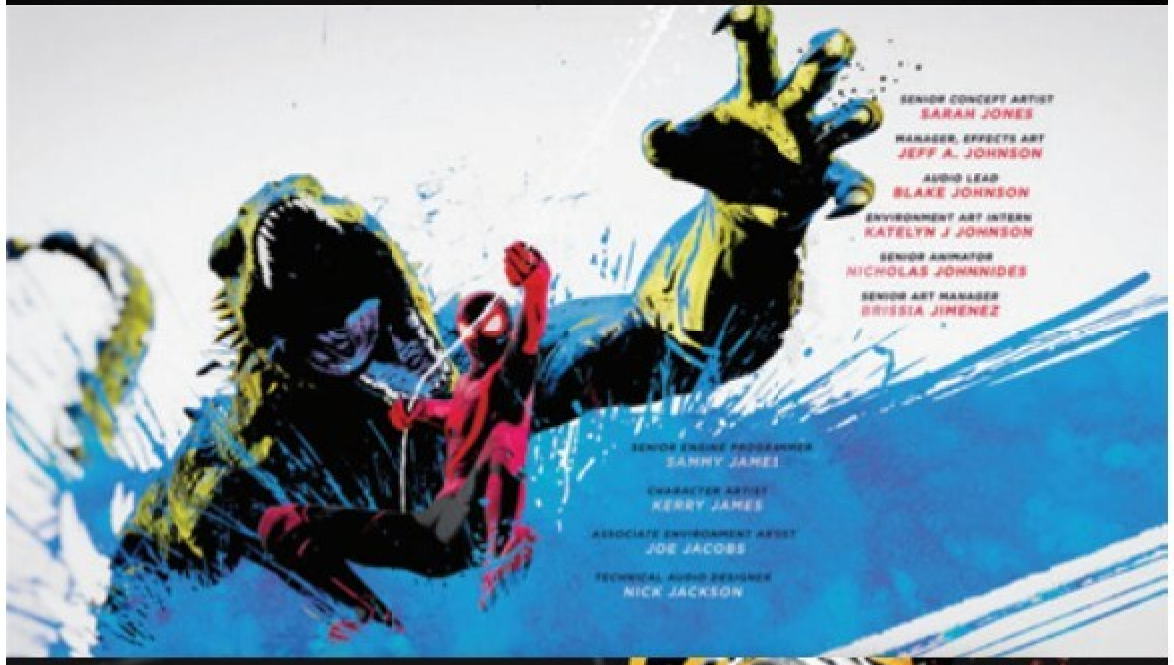
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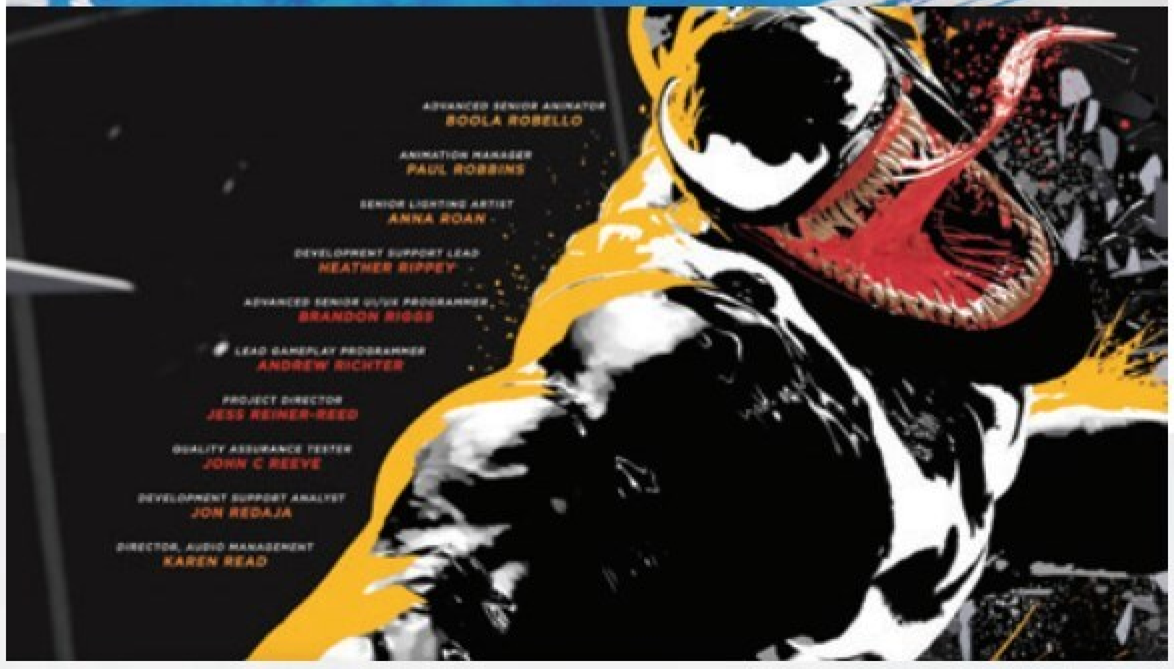
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DIRECTOR, AUDIO MANAGEMENT
KAREN READ

MARVEL
SPIDER-MAN 2

GEAR

NEW GEAR FOR THE NEW YEAR

BY MATT MILLER

VIDEO COMPUTER SYSTEM ™
ON
OFF
COLOR
B•W
ATARI 2600
10 GAMES IN 1
10 GAMES IN 1 CARTRIDGE
ATARI 2600™
1

❶ ATARI 2600+

Atari has smartly invested in old-school appeal with several recent projects. For those looking for this particular brand of throwback, the 2600+ is about as authentic as you can get while maintaining several modern conveniences.

From console to joystick, this is an immaculate recreation of the look of the original 2600 machine that first went on sale in 1977. But unlike that machine, the new 2600+ offers HDMI output and widescreen support for modern displays. The platform can also play both 2600 and 7800 cartridges, whether newly produced or if you still have your old collection of originals lying around.

The purchase price includes a 10-in-1 cartridge with several early Atari hits, including the likes of Missile Command and Yars' Revenge. But one of the coolest features is how Atari has been introducing new and revitalized cartridge titles you may have never encountered, like Dark Chambers, Aquaventure, and Mr. Run and Jump.

Atari's retro console is for a particular breed and age of nostalgia, but if you already know you're in that camp, you'll be pleased with what it's done here.

$130 | *atari.com*

❷ STEAM DECK OLED

Valve's new Steam Deck OLED is one more step toward convenient and high-quality portable PC play for the gaming community. The new OLED model isn't a fundamentally new machine from the original release, and as such, it likely has limited appeal to existing owners of an earlier Steam Deck.

But Valve certainly isn't above making it a tempting offer. The OLED model improves on nearly every complaint leveled at the original Steam Deck's launch. Much better battery life, cooler running, lighter weight (though only marginally), and improved Wi-Fi connectivity are all appreciated changes.

And that's before accounting for the feature named in its title: The new OLED is about a half inch larger than the original model, and the brightness of graphics and color gradations are striking. Visuals impress across the growing range of Steam Deck-verified titles, from Baldur's Gate 3 to Jusant.

Since the original Steam Deck launch, competitors have begun to offer strong alternatives to enter the burgeoning portable gaming PC space. But with the new OLED model, Valve has a machine it can stand beside with pride; it's a fantastic way to take your Steam library on the go.

$549 (512 GB), $649 (1TB) | *store.steampowered.com*

❸ PLAYSTATION PORTAL

Sony's new remote player isn't a portable console but a targeted way to play your existing library of games from a connected PS5, using Wi-Fi as the conduit. That makes it an ideal choice for gamers who enjoy playing but don't always have access to the family TV or wish to play in other parts of the house.

Other products like a phone with a connected controller can already provide remote play, but Sony's first-party offering has the advantage of a particularly large and attractive 8-inch touch-display screen, which impresses with its deep blacks and sharp picture – though we do recommend dimmer play spaces where possible.

Another big advantage is the haptics and adaptive trigger functionality you'd find in the PS5's category-leading DualSense. That controller is a significant distinguishing feature for PS5 play, and it's slick to see those capabilities in action on a remote machine.

The PlayStation Portal isn't for everyone and was never intended to be. But it's a real win for parents, players who must share a TV with family members, and other users who sometimes want to game but just can't get on the big TV. ■

$200 | *direct.playstation.com* | *gamestop.com*

THE BEST BOARD GAMES OF 2023

BY MATT MILLER

Incredible gaming was not limited to the screen this year. A wealth of fantastic board, card, and miniature games found their way to tables, bringing friends and families together for evenings of strategy, imagination, and fun. From simple party games to sprawling quest-driven adventures, these are some of the year's best new projects for your gaming group.

For more great tabletop gaming, including the best tabletop role-playing games of 2023, visit GameInformer.com/TopOfTheTable

Darwin's Journey

Darwin's Journey

Publisher: ThunderGryph Games

Players head out across the Galapagos, examining unusual animal species, investigating life's diversity, and contributing to the field of biology as they dispatch information back to museums to further human understanding. The complex and interconnected worker placement mechanics demand careful strategy from the start, with nearly every action crucial to securing victory. With board art that recalls Darwin's familiar sketchwork, it's a thinker's game that celebrates the mystery and discovery of science.

Mycelia
Ravensburger

Mycelia

Publisher: Ravensburger

Not every strategy game needs to consume your playgroup for hours at a time. Mycelia is a charming deck-builder in which players compete to bring dew drops from the forest to the nearby shrine, using adorable and friendly fungi hero cards as gatherers. Gameplay is brisk, the components make for a beautiful table display, and double-sided player boards lend replayability. It's a lovely choice for players seeking adorable fun or even for families with older children.

Earth

Publisher: Inside Up Games

This charming but strategically rich tableau-building game challenges players to build a natural ecosystem while drafting cards from a vast supply of over 300 options. Each player mixes and matches things like the island and climate where the game begins, lending an asymmetrical quality. Featuring strong ecological overtones, Earth's most impressive trick is how it keeps every player acting and engaged with gameplay, even when it's another player's turn.

EXPEDITIONS

Expeditions

Publisher: Stonemaier Games

2016's Scythe was a standout success thanks to its tightly balanced engine-building gameplay and gorgeous alternate-history setting. Expeditions is the sequel, and while the evocative art style and world are the same, there's plenty new to discover. Players compete to build power, finish quests, and investigate the mysteries behind powerful meteorite pieces, all with a strong focus on exploration and discovery.

FREELANCERS
A CROSSROADS GAME

Freelancers: A Crossroads Game

Publisher: Plaid Hat Games

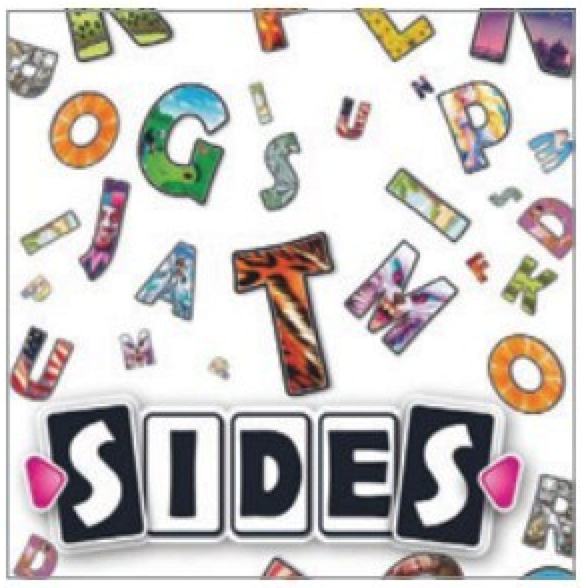
Plaid Hat's celebrated Crossroads system gives tremendous flexibility and choice to players for crafting their course through a tale, and the cooperative Freelancers is one of the best to date. Like a game of Dungeons & Dragons set in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, the game doesn't use a game master like an RPG might. Instead, the integrated recorded audio elements add flavor, depth, and fun. It's a rollicking, creature-slaying, player-driven good time.

MARVEL
DAGGER

Marvel D.A.G.G.E.R.

Publisher: Fantasy Flight Games

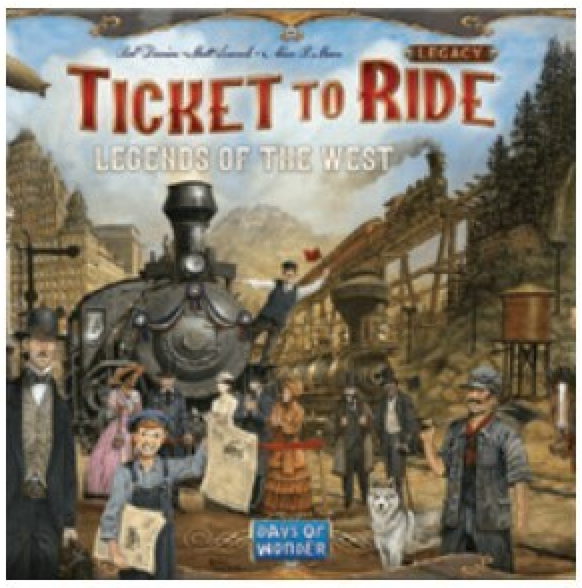
We've seen many Marvel tabletop games in recent years, but this cooperative venture is one of the strongest. Players team up to take on one of four distinct villains, each controlling one of the iconic heroes from the comics. While globetrotting to confront the bad guys, players are kept busy with a brisk turn order that never leaves anyone waiting long to do something fun. And combo and team-up opportunities are plentiful, capturing that sense of heroes who must work as one to save the world.



Sides

Publisher: Captain Games

Part of the ever-growing genre of word party games, Sides challenges two of its players to act as detectives in pursuit of a mystery word. The other players attempt to offer one-word clues leading to the mystery word, but clues must start with a particular letter on the table, demanding clever use of vocabulary and context. The fewer the clues, the higher the score. It's a simple, approachable game that embraces the fun of the meanings behind our chosen words.



Ticket To Ride Legacy: Legends of the West

Publisher: Days of Wonder

Ticket to Ride has been a fixture of the tabletop hobby for years and is widely touted as an ideal gateway into more involved board games. The new legacy treatment maintains the core structure of building your railroad empire but gradually introduces new rules and features over a dozen scenarios. You even get to choose how to expand the map as America reaches ever westward. Just as the original game welcomed newcomers, Legends of the West serves as a pathway for players to uncover the joy of a linked and evolving campaign.

UNMATCHED
ADVENTURES
Tales to AMAZE
HEROES VS VILLAIN

Unmatched Adventures: Tales to Amaze

Publisher: Restoration Games

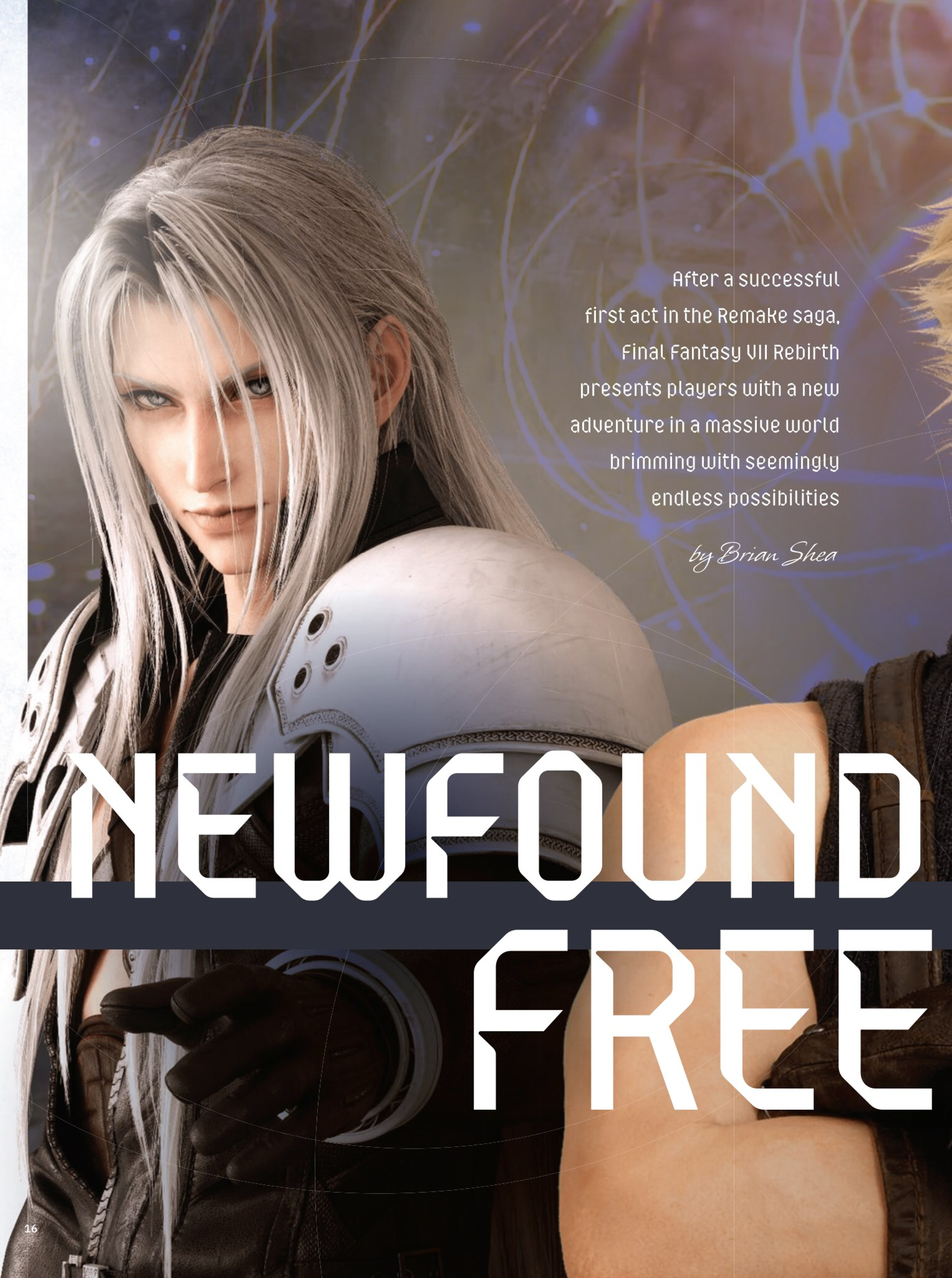
Earlier Unmatched sets offered tense, competitive, asymmetric miniature skirmishes. Tales to Amaze is a new twist using the same system to tell themed cooperative scenarios inspired by pulp adventure stories. Players band together to take on the Mothman or Martian Invader. The simple-to-understand rules don't hold it back from significant tactical complexity, and the stellar art and production values make this an ideal way to experience the growing series – you can even mix and match existing heroes from other sets into play.

THE WITCHER
OLD WORLD

The Witcher: Old World

Publisher: Go On Board

Since it's been some time since a new Witcher video, fans should consider sating their monster-hunting hunger with this excellent competitive adventure board game. Set in the years before Geralt's exploits, Witchers wander the Continent, seeking trophies to cement their legacy. Players build their deck of cards to establish power, and the fun comes from combining different attacks, magic, and other abilities to win battles and resolve quests. It's fun to play, beautifully presented, and a credit to the best aspects of the franchise. ■



After a successful first act in the Remake saga, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth presents players with a new adventure in a massive world brimming with seemingly endless possibilities

by Brian Shea

NEWFOUND
FREE

DOM

The launch of 1997's Final Fantasy VII on PlayStation signaled a seismic shift in the video game landscape.

The transition from pixel art to fully animated computer graphics was a massive enough leap ahead, but the beauty of this classic title was much more than skin deep. Featuring a stellar cast of beloved characters, a rock-solid combat system, and a story with the potential to instill emotions ranging from awe and joy to grief and anger, the legacy of Final Fantasy VII is well-established in the RPG genre and the games industry as a whole.

In the decades since , technology has evolved, as have trends. What was once the pinnacle of technology and visual fidelity now looks dated, and the attitudes of modern gamers look more towards action than the traditional RPG combat featured in the original Final Fantasy VII. But the love for Final Fantasy VII, its world, its message, and its characters never faded. And fans began clamoring for a modern take on the classic.

That prevalent fan request was finally met in 2020 with Final Fantasy VII Remake, the first of three parts reimagining the events of Final Fantasy VII with modern visuals and gameplay. The critical acclaim and strong fan reception showed that Square Enix wasn't taking the task of remaking its beloved RPG lightly. With the second part, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, on the horizon, we flew to Tokyo, Japan, to meet with Square Enix, get our hands on the game, see exclusive gameplay, and talk to core members of the development team about why this second entry is upping the ante in nearly every way.

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Square Enix
DEVELOPER Square Enix **RELEASE** February 29

The Prelude

The ground beneath Square Enix's Tetsuya Nomura's feet trembled. In his time since serving as a character designer and visual director on Final Fantasy VII, his legend has grown substantially. In addition to working on nearly every acclaimed Final Fantasy game since, Nomura also helped create the Kingdom Hearts series and become a figurehead and luminary within the stacked ranks of Square Enix's stable of developers. But this 2015 trip to Los Angeles, California, was different.

PlayStation's E3 2015 livestream had just revealed a teaser trailer featuring the iconic Final Fantasy VII protagonist, Cloud Strife, walking through Midgar in glorious, modern, HD graphics. The dream of so many fans – a modern remake of the classic RPG – was finally realized. The fans weren't the only ones feeling the weight of the moment, though, and it was no longer just the ground that was shaking; it was Nomura's entire body.

"There were no staff members around, so I was kind of just off to the side, standing there alone," Nomura says. "When I heard the cheers from the crowd and the passion, I became overwhelmed, and I started shivering. I was walking like a fawn, just overwhelmed by the intensity of the crowd. I thought, 'This has become such a big deal,' and I wanted to cry."

The road to this moment was long and arduous but something Nomura had dreamt of for years. Operating as a team of one, Nomura had spent part of the 2000s imagining what a modern remake of Final Fantasy VII could look like. Unfortunately, not much progress was made since the rest of the team members were tied up with other projects.

Around that time, fans started clamoring for a modernized remake of Final Fantasy VII, and the developers began hearing about it from media members. Yoshinori Kitase, who has worked at Square Enix since 1990, serving as director on beloved games like Final Fantasy VI, Chrono Trigger, the original Final Fantasy VII, and Final Fantasy X, was inundated with questions during a series of 2009 interviews.

"We were on the U.S. media tour for Final Fantasy XIII, and we took on a bunch of interviews, and we got a ton of questions from reporters asking, 'When are we going to make a Final Fantasy VII remake?'" Kitase recalls. "Just hearing that so many times, I did think that we would do it one day, that's for certain."

Kitase returned to Tokyo and approached Nomura about making it a reality. As two of the creators of the original Final Fantasy VII, they noticed the writing on the wall; fan and media demand was at a fever pitch, and Square Enix was beginning to embrace the idea of modern remakes for classic games more than ever before. They knew they had to act.

“Within Square Enix, gradually, remakes were being made, and these ideas for remakes were coming up in other departments,” Nomura says. “If we weren’t going to do Final Fantasy VII, others were going to do it, so we had to rise up and do it! We had the sense that we had to guard Final Fantasy VII and have to be the ones taking this on or someone else is going to do it. I thought it may be a bit troublesome if other teams without us took on the project.”

Nomura and Kitase are a pair of legends within the Final Fantasy and Square Enix fandom, but they needed help to make it a reality. To create the team, the duo tapped into Square Enix Creative Business Unit I, the group historically responsible for many of the most beloved Final Fantasy titles. Kazushige Nojima, who joined Square Enix in 1994, working on games like Final Fantasy VII, VIII, and X, as well as the Kingdom Hearts series, and Motomu Toriyama, who joined Square Enix in 1995 and worked on the original Final Fantasy VII in addition to Final Fantasy X, XIII, and more, signed on to co-write the remake.

“I had always hoped to be a part of the title if and when a remake was to be made,” Toriyama says. “I was very happy when hearing the news [that we were making one].”

But the development team behind this project couldn’t just be members of the original dev team; most had left the company or were working on other projects. “I would say the majority of the dev staff and production members are those who were players of the original, not creators,” Toriyama says.

Two of those developers who started as fans of the Final Fantasy series before joining Square Enix are Naoki Hamaguchi and Teruki Endo. Hamaguchi joined Square Enix in 2003, working on titles like Final Fantasy XII and the XIII trilogy. After serving as project manager on the mobile title Mobius Final Fantasy, he joined the Remake team as a co-director. Endo got his start in the late 2000s at Capcom, working primarily on the Monster Hunter series, but when he heard about a remake for Final Fantasy VII, as a fan of the original, he couldn’t resist joining the team as battle director.

“I was working for another gaming company when I heard they were looking for members to be involved on the battle side of creating this game and felt like this was a great opportunity in which I could utilize the skills that I had gained thus far working in the industry,” Endo recalls.

With the core team assembled, Final Fantasy VII Remake was underway.

Remaking a Classic

When a game is as beloved as Final Fantasy VII, modernizing it without alienating fans of the original can be a tricky proposition; if you keep things too close to the remake, then you don't keep up with the latest trends, squandering the opportunity to create something distinct. Conversely, if you push things too far away from the source material, you risk alienating those who made Final Fantasy VII so famous in the first place.

According to Toriyama, the members of the team who experienced VII as fans, like Hamaguchi and Endo, are more protective of the source material than those who worked on the original title. Kitase worried those younger staff members would be too loyal to the original title, but his concerns eased once the team started working. "This concern was all for naught because this was clearly not true," Kitase says. "We were able to work together very well and realize all of our visions and a game that can be accepted and enjoyed by contemporary users, so that was wonderful."

The team worked together to balance the old with the new, to create something that definitively retells the story of Final Fantasy VII with modern conventions while not going too far in either direction. "For me, it really comes down to considering what it was that the players enjoyed and loved in the original title," Endo says. "Of course, we expect a variance in each player's depth and span of what they enjoy and the things that they love, but at the end of the day, I do have to trust my own instincts and thoughts on what I loved and enjoyed playing the game."

For Endo's part – the battle system – he opted to blend action with the more traditional Active Time Battle (ATB) mechanics from the original game, in which characters can act once a meter fills. The result appeals to both new and longtime players. "Seeing that the Final Fantasy series has a strong focus on its characters, I believe the action enhances this and lets the players be further immersed into

Throw
Attack
Commands Menu

the characters as they play," Endo says. "Along with the strategic battles that I believe are key to Final Fantasy VII, I wanted to see how best I could mix these two elements of the command and strategy-based battle with the action that allows for that instance immersion."

Though Endo wanted to introduce action, his desire to balance it with the traditional ATB elements struck a chord with Nomura. "I do have this idea of how Final Fantasy battles should be and should feel," Nomura says. "We want to still keep this strategy element, in which the player will consider the elemental weaknesses of enemies during battle while using these action moves and being engaged, intact. That was always my core belief in how we should approach Final Fantasy battles. [...] I thought this was truly vital to this game; I didn't want it to be a game where it's a reflex-type action or reflex-based battle; we wanted to combine all of these elements."

The battle system of Final Fantasy VII Remake garnered acclaim, but it's not the only piece of the title that changed. The visual leap forward is immediately recognizable, and the story received numerous upgrades. Instead of retelling the entire Final Fantasy VII arc in one game, Square Enix opted to release the remake in the form of three games. The first title, Final Fantasy VII Remake, retold the party's initial push through Midgar – a section of the original that takes about 6 hours to complete – across a 30 to 40-hour title.

This decision came from Nomura, who identified early on that fully capturing the events of Final Fantasy VII in a modern way and with enough depth to do the story justice wouldn't be possible in its original one-game form, not to mention the drastically different format the game takes following the party's emergence from Midgar. "To recreate the world of Final Fantasy VII as it was in the original today in its full volume, the only way for us to realize this was to divide the titles or else it simply was not possible," Nomura says. "We had to divide it, or we can't do it right."

Final Fantasy VII Remake's extended stay in Midgar fully fleshed out characters previously relegated to minor roles like Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie and further developed the personalities and relationships of the main characters like Cloud, Tifa, Barret, and Aerith. "When the remake project was first decided, at that point, we had already felt that if we are going to take on this series, it's imperative that we depict the characters much deeper," Nomura says.

Final Fantasy VII Remake was released on PlayStation 4 on April 10, 2020, earning an 87 out of 100 on reviews aggregator Metacritic, including an 8.75 out of 10 from *Game Informer*. And now, with the quality bar set high and fan expectations even higher, that same team sets out to push the well-known story forward as Cloud and his friends step outside of Midgar and venture into a massive world full of adventure and intrigue in the second act of the Remake series, Final Fantasy VII Rebirth.

ENDURING RELEVANCE

The story of Final Fantasy VII explores themes of corporate greed, environmentalism, and mental health – all topics that feel more relevant than ever in the more than 25 years since the release of the classic RPG. Though the developers didn't intentionally reference specific real-world social issues, they acknowledge how relevant those themes are today.

"In Final Fantasy VII, we were able to depict these types of issues, like the cycle of life, through the concept of Lifestream," producer Yoshinori Kitase says. "If we were to depict it exactly as we experience it in the real world, it would not be very interesting. With [writer Kazushige Nojima's] ideas, we were able to have this centered on Lifestream and the planet within the worldview of Final Fantasy VII. In this way, I believe the game and its themes remain relevant and withstand the test of time."

Kitase also hopes these themes are depicted more effectively in the Final Fantasy VII Remake series. "Considering the way to depict social problems, social issues, and cultural depictions, in some ways, I am a bit embarrassed by the original title," he says. "In its expression, in some ways, it was very young and naïve in itself. That is a learning for us, but at the same time, I do believe perhaps that is one of the reasons why it was so widely accepted. It's not perfect, and it's kind of uneven and jagged in its young and naïve nature of its depiction. Of course, after 25 years, there is a lot of personal learning, changes, and growth. But looking back on it, some parts of it, I am a bit embarrassed."

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32

Breaking Out

Following the events of Final Fantasy VII Remake, Cloud, Tifa, Aerith, Barret, and Red XIII have escaped from the restrictive confines of Midgar. This accurately reflects the progression of the story and format in the original Final Fantasy VII, as the party emerges from Midgar's close quarters and linearity and into an open and explorable world map.

The longtime Final Fantasy developers have had this in mind ever since Final Fantasy X changed how adventures in the world progress. "We started off expressing this world that you can venture through with a world map; that was how it was starting with Final Fantasy I," Kitase, who serves as producer on Rebirth, says. "But starting with Final Fantasy X, when we entered into this real-time 3D world, this is when the world map development ceased or halted to some degree. With X, it was the style where a player chose a point or an area they would like to go to and traveled there. In that sense, the feeling was that, since it's real-time 3D, it's not quite possible to create this full world map anymore."

While Final Fantasy XV did move closer to the original world map vision when it was released in 2016, Kitase assumed that Hamaguchi, serving as co-director on Rebirth, would want to continue with that convention of other recent Final Fantasy titles. However, they both felt it would be a disservice to the original not to include an interconnected world map for players to explore, particularly once the adventure opens up so much in the portion depicted in Rebirth.

The team members, including creative director Nomura, were happy to hear the world map was back, allowing players to freely explore the vast, open wilds in the original game. "Ever since the world map disappeared, I really had this weird feeling, and I always thought it was strange without a world map," Nomura says. "I thought that you can't really have an RPG without a world map, and specifically for Final Fantasy VII, to fully experience this world, we must have a world map; we can't be without it."

The resulting adventure in Final Fantasy VII Rebirth is a vastly different experience that features enormous, explorable regions and pushes players toward side content. "Seeing that Remake is set in the world of Midgar, in which the player can explore within that area, we leaned heavily on story elements and were focused on a more narrative-driven game for Remake," Hamaguchi says. "Now that we're

entering into the outside world and going forward in that direction, I have this desire to depict more of that feeling of exploration, and I very much feel that this was able to be accomplished for Rebirth."

The openness of exploration is refreshing after the often corridor-like structure of Remake. According to Hamaguchi, players should expect to find a ton of side content. In fact, he estimates that approximately 80 percent of the game's exploration-based content is side content, while the mainline story makes up the remaining 20 percent. If that makes you worry that Rebirth lacks story content, Hamaguchi says you can relax; even simply focusing on the main storyline, he estimates it will give players around 40 hours of gameplay. Meanwhile, if you tackle a decent amount of the side content, players can expect to spend around 60 hours in Rebirth, while the most dedicated sidequesters can look forward to upwards of 100 hours of content.

But it's not content bloat to inflate those playtime hours. When I ask Hamaguchi for his favorite RPG outside of the Final Fantasy series, without hesitation, he names The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt, CD Projekt Red's 2015 masterpiece that many consider one of the greatest games of all time. That title is known for its meaningful side content, which is so strong that its storylines sometimes even match those of the main story.

"Regarding titles like The Witcher 3, which has that open-world role-playing type element, we did some extensive research into these types of titles and looked at it as a baseline in which Rebirth should be a type of title that can stand alongside it and have the type of content that would be satisfying to its players," Toriyama says.

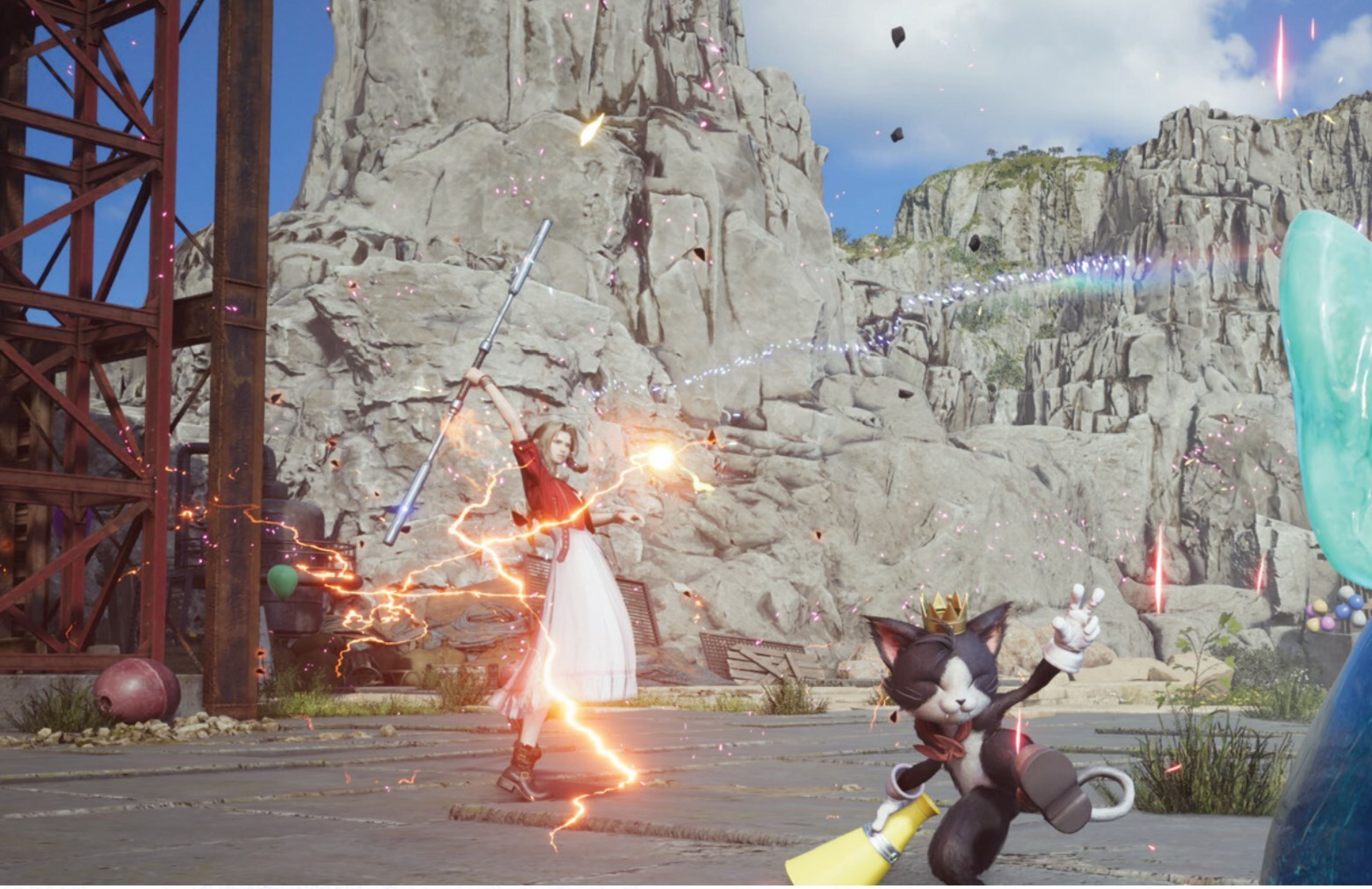
Those who played Final Fantasy VII Remake will recognize one of the prominent sidequest givers: Chadley. The young researcher once again wants your help learning about Materia, and he'll reward you with additional summons. As you move through the world, he asks you to look into certain happenings through events called World Intel. During my hands-on session, Chadley asked me to hunt down and defeat certain enemy types as I journey through the sprawling open landscape. With each drawn-out battle, I receive side objectives to complete that will help further Chadley's research.

The rewards sound worth it, but from everything I hear from the developers, the story may be the driving force behind pushing players to sidequests. To make side content more meaningful, Square Enix expanded the affinity system. This under-the-hood mechanic takes your actions towards a character and translates them into how certain scenes play out. Final Fantasy VII Rebirth's side content is a critical driver for this mechanic. Each side quest brings in a secondary protagonist from the party. Completing a side quest improves Cloud's affinity with the given character.

I witnessed this firsthand in an exclusive hands-off demo as Cloud and his party travel to the Crow's Nest, a town that wasn't in the original game. This sister town to Under Junon features just as many anti-Shinra residents, so once they find out Cloud and his friends are in Avalanche, they welcome them with open arms. In my demo, as the party returns to the town, the Crow's Nest's residents greet them with cheers. This is because the team just completed a side mission where they retrieved an item for another resident. After taking a stroll around the area, Cloud talks to a person who informs him of a mercenary operating out of a nearby lighthouse. Of course, Cloud decides to investigate.

ZACK IS BACK

At the end of Final Fantasy VII Remake, players were surprised by Zack's unexpected appearance. The character, who died before the original game's events, appears to have a more defined role this time. "We have used the character Zack to depict the combined view of [story and scenario writer Kazushige Nojima, creative director Tetsuya Nomura, and producer Yoshinori Kitase] – the original creators' – intents of how this world of Final Fantasy VII came to be and its policies and rule governing this world," director Naoki Hamaguchi says. "This is going to be depicted through the character of Zack. As much as the Whispers within the story, Zack is an equally, immensely important, crucial, key character to this story that I believe fans will enjoy within Rebirth."



On the Road Again

In the original Final Fantasy VII, the mountains around Junon prevent you from passing, but Cloud is much nimbler in Rebirth and can climb up and down ledges to reach the desired areas. In addition, players can also call Chocobos to ride and ease traversal. As you journey through the various regions, you encounter different Chocobo types, each with distinct abilities. One class can fly, while another can use jet propulsion to hover over water. The Chocobos in this area are known as Mountain Chocobos and can scale specific walls to reach high ledges or descend rapidly.

On the way to the merc, I get a sense of the battle styles of the two new party members. Red XIII is agile and quick and uses the guard mechanic to fill a meter for his new Vengeance Mode, which increases his speed and attack power. Meanwhile, Cait Sith brings the most unique combat style yet to the Remake series, including moves that play off the luck mechanic from the original game. Cait Sith can fight separately or summon a Moogle to ride around on. When on the Moogle, Cait Sith has an entirely separate moveset than when he's solo, such as a Moogle Mine attack, where bombs spread across the battlefield. He can also dismount and use his solo moves, while Moogle will continue attacking as controlled by A.I. Moogle has a separate HP meter, and if he takes too much damage, he'll vanish until Cait Sith summons him again.

After reaching the lighthouse, players meet Kyrie, a character initially appearing in the Final Fantasy VII novel *The Kids Are Alright: A Turks Side Story*, but who has since appeared in Remake. In Rebirth, she's trying to get her new mercenary business off the ground, but she isn't the most well-equipped for the job, so she pops up around the world, and it's up to you to assist her.

After wondering why no customers have come to procure her services, the party realizes that the theme song she's been playing attracts enemies, which has scared off any potential clients. In this case, it's a series of Flans followed by more powerful White Mousses. Hamaguchi, who is playing the demo for me, takes the opportunity to call Titan, one of Rebirth's summons. The hulking creature joins the party in battle, tearing through the White Mousses and helping complete the mission.

Red XIII is the secondary protagonist for this mission, and thanks to his animal-like appearance, Kyrie wants to make him her pet. Obviously, he shoots her down, and as she runs off to her next post, Red XIII looks at Cloud and remarks, "I wouldn't wish her on my worst enemy."

Cloud and Red XIII's affinity increases for completing this mission, potentially affecting story beats and side content. "We wanted to give players the freedom of choice in deciding whether they wanted to dedicate themselves solely to the main storyline and, like, no side quests at all," Hamaguchi says. "Or there might be people who want to delve into the side content and go really in-depth into the character relationships and understand the story deeper, or just the balance of those two. We wanted to give that freedom."

Another way you can improve affinity is by using a Synergy Ability between two characters for the first time. These two-character attacks use a Synergy Gauge that charges when you use ATB for a character. Each potential character pairing has a Synergy Ability with a custom animation and effect. For example, pairing Cloud and Cait Sith results in one of the zaniest attacks where the Moogle grabs Cloud's Buster Sword while Cloud rides on its back. I loved seeing what each combination resulted in and these additional moves add extra layers of nuance to an already-stellar system. But most importantly, the notion of Synergy Abilities plays into a central theme of Rebirth, which is the deepening of the relationships between the party members.

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MOUNTAINS OF MINIGAMES

The original Final Fantasy VII features a ton of minigames – particularly during its middle section – and Rebirth is no different. One of the most involved and continuous minigames is Queen's Blood, a competitive card game you can play against NPCs in Rebirth.

While the team remains tight-lipped about the exact mechanics, we know it is a strategic card battler with collectible and deck-building elements. "In terms of the number of cards, there is a massive amount – enough to be, like, its own card game almost," co-director Motomu Toriyama says. "Part of the fun will be collecting these cards. Queen's Blood is more of a strategy-and-thinking kind of card game, but I took a look at some of the gameplay when you are towards the end, and you have collected all of the cards, and it has the potential to become a very flashy, fast-paced card game; it almost has that instant-ness of a shooting game in which your opponent may put down a card, then you will instantly put down a card while putting down another. It's very fast. Of course, this is on maximum difficulty level of the card game, so I believe there are only going to be a few players that play at this intensity level."

The other minigame I got a look at is a piano activity. Through exploration, Cloud can find sheet music for compositions within the world. He can then sit at the piano and play the songs using the two analog sticks and some buttons. The piano minigame also features a freeplay mode, which allows you to perform any song you want. I watched a developer play a famous Japanese song using the in-game piano mechanics. It looks like it'll take a lot of practice to get that good, but the mechanics seem deep, and the team wants players to embrace the ability to play any song they like and share their performances online.

I didn't get a look at the Chocobo racing, but the team touts its improvements and modernizations to be more in line with what players expect from a modern form; players can equip their Chocobos with stat-boosting gear and the different types of Chocobos perform differently. Toriyama tells me the Rebirth team even briefly considered collaborating with the developers of 2022 kart-racer Chocobo GP for the minigame, but eventually decided to go its own route. With Gold Saucer and Fort Condor still yet to be discussed or shown, I can only imagine the minigames waiting for players when they venture to those areas.

The One-Winged Angel Returns

But it's not just the party members whose backstories and relationships are explored further. Sephiroth, the main antagonist, also has a more significant role this time. "Remake covers your encounter with Sephiroth, and now within Rebirth, we wanted to make Sephiroth into this very clear antagonist and target for the characters to go and pursue throughout their journey in Rebirth," Kitase says. "Within the original game, Sephiroth is not seen very much within the world map, but in this title, we put this element forward."

During a hands-on sequence, I played through an extended version of the flashback, which features Cloud and Sephiroth teaming up to explore Mt. Nibel and find the mako reactor. At this point in the story, Sephiroth is still a heroic figure, and Cloud is a naïve and inexperienced Soldier, so the two are teaming up to complete this mission. Meanwhile, a young Tifa serves as a guide but not a party member. Sephiroth is a powerful force, slashing through enemies and dealing tremendous damage with the Masamune. He's not quite as overpowered as he was in the original game's corresponding flashback, but he is a blast to play. Even though Sephiroth's only playable in a tiny part of the game, they invested in developing his gameplay, even giving him a Synergy Ability with Cloud.

"When developing Sephiroth as a character who players are able to control in a limited area, we're still considering that you're able to play as this very iconic character," Endo says. "Taking this into mind, I really took care into providing the sort of resources and cost as equal to those of other playable characters into developing Sephiroth in a battle sense."

The team had to use caution when approaching its handling of Sephiroth. After all, he's one of gaming's most iconic and influential antagonists, so naturally, fans will be touchy about any substantial changes. "We felt it was necessary to have this very clear depiction of how he came to be the person that he is now in Rebirth," Hamaguchi says. "Even as a developer creating this game, seeing Sephiroth discover the truth and fall further and further into darkness – like falling from grace – and depicting this in his expressions and actions, I could truly feel bad for him. Throughout the course of Rebirth, I believe players will not only grow to relate to and understand Cloud, but also Sephiroth through this game much more."

Seeing Sephiroth's rise to prominence as a more powerful adversary to Cloud and the rest of the party will likely lead to a more impactful depiction of the events where Rebirth's story comes to a close: the events at the Forgotten Capital.

Reborn Only to Die?

Final Fantasy VII Rebirth may feature side content and minigames galore, but the main story will undoubtedly leave its mark. Since Rebirth brings the story up to the point where the party reaches the Forgotten Capital, players will need to reckon with Aerith's story arc after playing a game built around deepening the connections between the party members. When I asked the development team about this scene, the previously jovial mood dropped into a somber state. While the team is tight-lipped about how the events will play out, it insists it has achieved something that will shock even the players who have played through the scene in question multiple times

"Beginning with the original Final Fantasy VII, when we had started working on it, it was already decided from the get-go that 'life' would be the central theme surrounding Final Fantasy VII," Nomura says. "I knew that we had to depict life and death within this title. Prior to Final Fantasy VII, there have been other titles where characters have experienced tragedy, but many of them have come back or been revived in some way. But I believe that loss is something that happens unexpectedly, and it's not something so dramatic or drawn out, but is something in which a person that you have just conversed with is suddenly gone and never to come back. I believe that the person who dies should not return in this title, and that is what we did with the original."

Those familiar with the scene know all too well the emotional impact the events could have with deepened relationships and much better technological capabilities to express the full scope of the events. The way the developers tease how it plays out, I can't help but be curious and speculate about how it might differ from the original. After all, the Whispers that helped control the fate of Remake are gone; maybe things can play out differently this time. Or perhaps I'm just setting myself up to be hurt again.

Much like the characters in the Final Fantasy VII Remake series, who are no longer governed by predetermined fate, the developers talk as though the possibilities in Final Fantasy VII Rebirth are endless. And after what Square Enix accomplished through Final Fantasy VII Remake and how the team explains its approach to Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, I'm inclined to believe them. ■

To go more in-depth about Final Fantasy VII Rebirth, the making of the Remake series, and the legacy of Final Fantasy VII, head to our exclusive content hub at GameInformer.com/FF7Rebirth

TIME IS AN OCEAN IN A STORM

After 13 years, *The Lost Crown* is finally giving Prince of Persia its overdue and triumphant return

BY KYLE HILLIARD

Beginning in 1989, the Prince of Persia series enjoyed consistent attention, with its longest break between releases being six years between Prince of Persia 2: The Shadow and the Flame and the better-left forgotten Prince of Persia 3D. 2003's Sands of Time and its two sequels marked a new era for Prince and, in many ways, laid the foundation for Ubisoft's most successful franchise, Assassin's Creed. The 2008 Prince of Persia reboot didn't reignite the series as Ubisoft had hoped, and 2010's Forgotten Sands felt closer to a movie tie-in than a new, proper entry.

That game's subtitle would end up being a portend of the future as the series seemed inexplicably lost to time. Though not completely ignored, thanks to the occasional cameo in other Ubisoft games and underplayed mobile releases, we will have gone 13 years without a new Prince of Persia game by the time The Lost Crown is released early next year. We're well overdue for another chance to explore a Persian location with our impressive parkour skills. We may not have expected the series to go back to its 2D roots for its triumphant return, but based on our discussions with developer Ubisoft Montpellier and playing the game's first three and a half hours, it may be precisely what we need.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Ubisoft Montpellier **RELEASE** January 18

THE SANDS OF TIME

"I think you should ask [Ubisoft CEO] Yves Guillemot," says game director Mounir Radi with a laugh when I ask why we've had to wait so long for a new Prince of Persia. He genuinely doesn't have an answer to the question, but his excitement at finally being able to bring the series back is evident.

The Lost Crown wasn't an assignment that came down on high from Ubisoft but was instead directed by the team Radi helped put together for the game.

"It's fully us. It's not a command," Radi says.

The moment just happened to be right. The people Radi wanted on the team with applicable skills like expertise in platforming and world-building were finally available within Ubisoft.

"I didn't want to do any Prince of Persia that I wouldn't be proud of," senior producer Abdelhak Elguess says, also citing having the right people be available at the right time be a major factor.

Once the team was assembled it took some time to decide in what direction the team wanted to go. Development began in 2019, which means pending any unforeseen delays, the game has been in development for almost five years.

"It was not 2D from the start," Radi says. "I had the chance to work on some prototypes in 2D, but before going into it, we studied the Prince of Persia series, just to be sure we understand all the legacy."

That effort meant researching what fans liked about Prince of Persia in all its forms. The team tried to emotionally detach itself from the franchise and focus analytically on what players might want from a new entry. Radi himself is a longtime fan of the series, predating its move to 3D movement, and hoped, specifically, to recall the tone of the original but with a contemporary lens. "I wanted to have a callback to the fear and isolation that I had when I was playing the 2D games," he says. "And to also push a lot of experimentation with the aspect of the time powers." That goal of isolation and fear naturally fit into the "Metroidvania" mold – a term Radi offers to describe the game without hesitation. After playing, I understand why. If you liked the structure of 2021's Metroid Dread, then you should absolutely be paying attention to The Lost Crown.

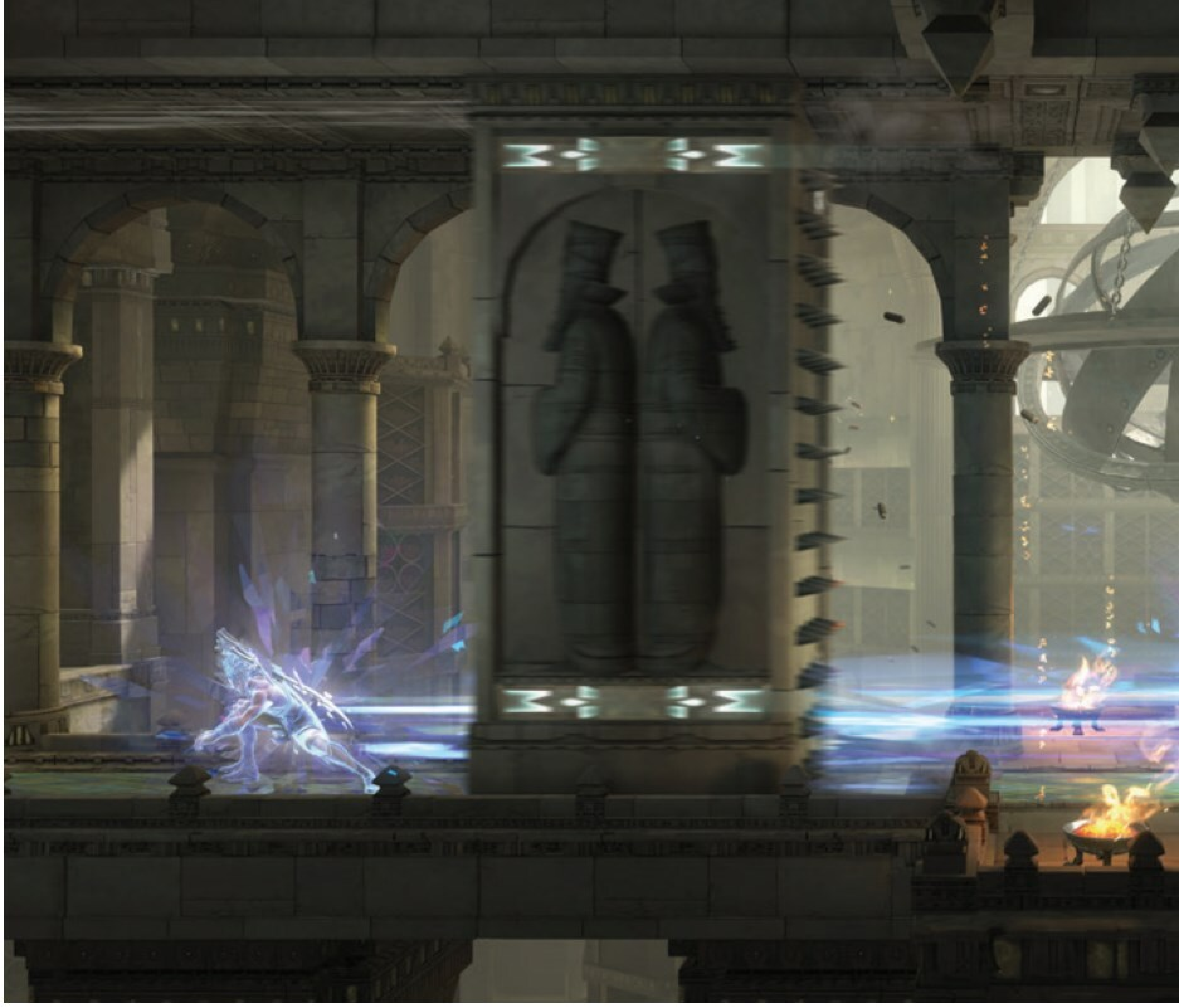
That isn't to say that Prince of Persia's excellent 3D iterations won't have representation. Radi is quick to compliment Sands of Time, and the team is doing everything within its abilities to ensure that moving back to 2D does not feel like a regression.

WARRIOR WITHIN

Previous Prince of Persia games being an influence on The Lost Crown admittedly goes without saying. To make a new Prince of Persia game without reverence to what came before would be a disservice to the longtime fans. But plenty of other games, and even entire genres, are serving as an influence for this new era of Prince of Persia, too. "Maybe you have heard that I am a big fan of fighting games?" Radi asks. "They achieve, I think, in the right way, the spectacular aspects of 2D action. I wanted to bring this to the screen." Fighting games can scare away some, however, with their complicated inputs and focus on educating players for some time before they feel they have a grasp on the action. "I understand that when talking about certain [fighting] games it can sound like complexity, but this is not that for me," Radi says. He cites games like Smash Bros. and Street Fighter that have a "super elegant" one attack, one function approach. "I wanted to take some aspect of the fighting games and make them much more straightforward."

Only speaking to Radi, I was unclear of exactly what he meant, but getting hands-on with the game, I have a much better feeling for how protagonist Sargon (who notably is not a Prince) attacks a little bit like a fighting game character. You do not perform combos with your swords by memorizing button patterns. You only use one button for sword attacks, but I was much more thoughtful about attacking enemies against walls and dashing into an attack to kick enemies into the air and bring the fight to the sky. It's also worth noting that the combat is very fast and very fun. Counters play an essential role and Sargon makes big sweeping attacks with his dual swords that feel great. I also like the focus on positioning and sliding under enemy legs or jumping over them to get the best angle of attack instead of unlocking button patterns. It made every encounter feel seamless and thoughtful. You also build up a meter to unleash a devastating special attack that is very important to manage, especially during boss fights.

Alongside Radi's fighting game interest comes expertise from some of the best platform designers in the industry. Much of The Lost Crown's team worked on Rayman Origins and Legends, and the main lesson from those games the team is applying here is a sense of musicality and rhythm in platforming – though you shouldn't expect any rhythm levels like the ones seen in Rayman Legends. "For me, and for a lot of people on the team, the action on-screen is music," Radi says. "When you work on a game such as Rayman, you learn how to convey this aspect into gameplay." Radi adds that when the team talks about how it wants the player to make Sargon bounce between walls or sprint through an area, it find itself gesticulating as if conducting in rhythm. Prince of Persia: The Lost Crown is quite different from Rayman, but in my time playing, I can feel the lessons learned from those games applied here.



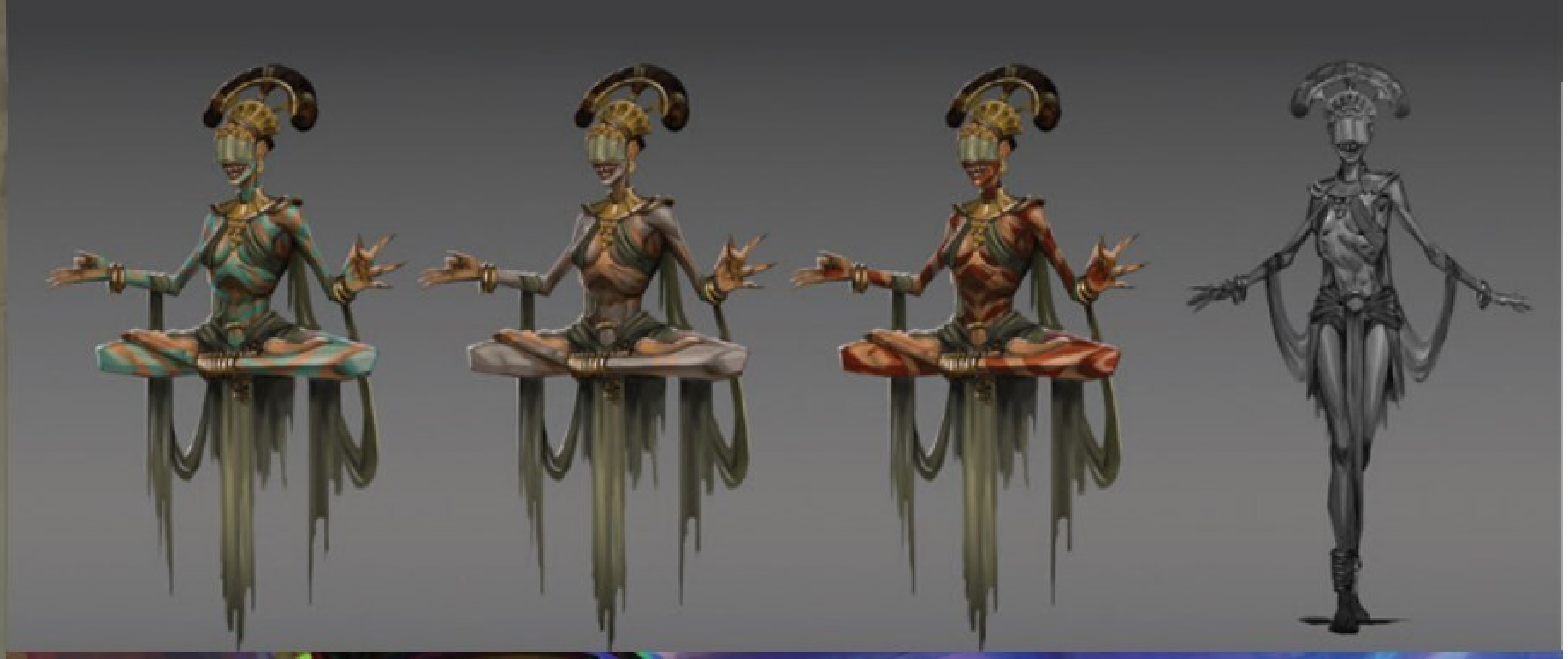
MOST THINK TIME IS LIKE A RIVER

Typically, in preview opportunities where we get to play a game ahead of release, we're dropped into the middle. This way, we avoid spoilers and early lengthy tutorials to, ideally, get a sense of a game when a player has already spent some time understanding how it plays. Perhaps as a show of confidence, Ubisoft let me play from the very beginning and then what felt like a significant way into the story. I won't spoil its biggest narrative surprises, but it did not take long for its hooks to be fully planted to the point I was disappointed I had to stop. I'll be more than happy to replay the game's opening hours again in January.

Before even starting, I changed the spoken language to Farsi (Persian in the game's settings), which will be an option at the game's launch. There are also difficulty options and Guided and Exploration modes. The former offers more map guidance for those who don't like getting lost, while the latter gives fewer player hints. The game begins on a battlefield with Persia defending itself from the Kushans, warriors from the east. Hope seems lost until The Immortals appear – seven ultra-powerful warriors with magical abilities who quickly turn the tide of battle.

The player controls Sargon, the youngest of The Immortals. The team drops into battle like a bomb, taking out swaths of the competing army at once. The game's opening teaches you how to play as Sargon while the six other Immortals fight beside you. They are all unique, with specific designs, silhouettes, abilities, and personalities. This first area also introduces you to Sargon's teacher, Anahita, who is not a member of The Immortals but also appears to be a skilled warrior.

Making my way through the battlefield is straightforward. I won't have a Metroid-style map until later. I learn how to jump on walls, use basic attacks, and when to counter. This tutorial area ends with a fight against General Uvishka, the leader of the Kushans, who is twice as big as Sargon and mounted on a horse. The battle is difficult, and it takes me multiple attempts. Appropriate counters are critical, as is making sure I use my health potion at the right time, which I later learn refills at every checkpoint, like Dark Souls. Defeating General Uvishka strikes the right balance of challenge and satisfaction. He kills me a handful of times, but



I never felt like I couldn't beat him in my encounters.

With the bombastic opening out of the way, it's time to better understand who Sargon is and what is happening in this world. Sargon's Immortals peers are impressed by his skill. Their relationship with him is one of proud teachers. They let him take on General Uvishka so he could finally get some recognition after all their teachings. The Persian Queen Thomyris awards Sargon a blue sash for his substantial efforts, which makes him look a little like the Prince from Sands of Time.

However, the most important character we meet is Prince Ghassan, the reluctant royal who is technically the titular Prince of Persia. He suggests meeting Sargon under more casual circumstances in the future. Sargon meets with the other Immortals to share in their victory, but the moment of respite is short. The kingdom is attacked, seemingly from the inside, and Prince Ghassan is kidnapped. Sargon rushes after him to discover that Anahita, Sargon's teacher, is taking Prince Ghassan, and she seems to be more powerful than she let on. This leads Sargon and The Immortals to chase and follow Anahita and Ghassan to the mystical Mount Qaf, former home of the god of time, where The Lost Crown takes place.

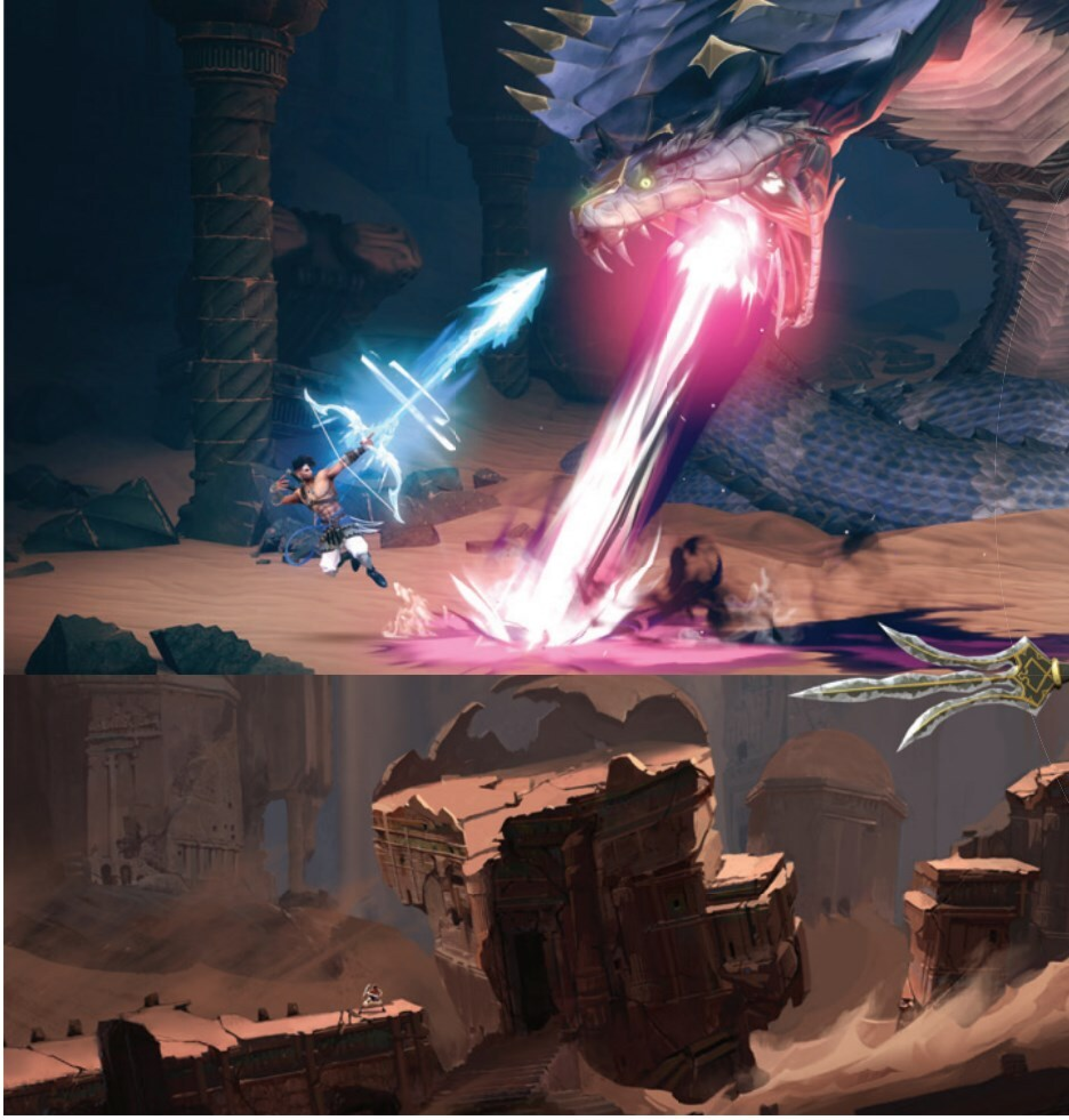
THE FALLEN KING

Mount Qaf is a dangerous, magical place that people explore at their own risk. Those who go there do not seem to return, but The Immortals are loyal and enter without question to save their prince. It does not take long for things to go wrong. The Immortals break into groups and begin looking for Ghassan, but Sargon is on his own. The Lost Crown begins to take on a familiar, Metroid-inspired structure. Multiple paths make themselves apparent, but most require a new ability. The Immortals also come across a recognizable decomposing soldier who looks like they have been dead for years, even though they are confident they would have only arrived a few hours ago.

A path of floating leaves directs me to a Wak-Wak tree, which I learn is the recurring save spot that appears throughout the game. A young girl named Fariba appears from the corner, claiming she has been here for years and knows everything about Mount Qaf. She is surprisingly cavalier about the whole situation and is entirely unimpressed by Sargon being a member of The Immortals. She gives Sargon the Eye of the Wanderer and a map that is more than it first appears.

THE WARRIOR FORMERLY KNOWN AS PRINCE

Historically, the protagonist of the Prince of Persia does not have a proper name. He has simply been "The Prince" since his inception. For the first time in series history, the Prince of Persia has a name – Prince Ghassan. But also for the first time in series history, you are not playing as the Prince. You are Sargon, a warrior tasked with protecting Ghassan. Internally, it was not much of a debate for game director Mounir Radi and the team. "For us, we're making a modern game. For us, it was the natural way. He has a name now." Senior producer Abdelhak Elguess shares a similar sentiment. "There was not too much discussion on this for us from the beginning," Elguess says. For a time, early in the project, Sargon's name was removed to keep with series tradition, but by the end of development, the team decided to add it back. "We thought it was better," Elguess says with a laugh.



Using the map, players can leverage a mechanic called Memory Shards. At any moment, you can press down on the d-pad to take a picture of your surroundings, automatically marking the map with a photo. I love this feature and frequently take advantage. It's the equivalent of making notes on your map. If a ledge was too high, I took a picture of it to note that I probably needed some kind of double jump before I could progress there. I did the same for odd-colored doors or other comparable hurdles I knew I was not yet ready to overcome.

As I continue exploring, I run into members of The Immortals, but everyone has strange stories. I have only been playing for about 30 minutes, which Sargon seems to be experiencing in real-time, but some members say they have been exploring for days. I find one exhausted soldier who isn't a member of The Immortals who claims they have been there for years. The strangest moment is when I find a dead body resembling Sargon with one of The Immortals' unique weapons, Monolias' bow. I take the bow from the body, grateful for the new weapon, but then run into Monolias later in the game. He still has his bow, meaning a different version of him and his bow must have existed. Time moves strangely on Mount Qaf, which is thematically consistent for Prince of Persia. The games have always had an element of time, whether it was the hour-long timer of the first game or the ability to rewind time in Sands of Time.

I eventually find Anahita and Prince Ghassan and manage to follow them, but not before encountering Kaheva, a true immortal, surviving god, who offers to upgrade my equipment. I also fight Jahandar, a winged lion with a scorpion tale. Like General Uvishka, Jahandar makes for a challenging but rewarding boss fight.

To delve more into the story would enter the world of spoilers, but I will tease that I was very surprised at some of the revelations I encountered about Sargon, Prince Ghassan, Anahita, and members of The Immortals – and that was only in the first three hours of what Ubisoft is estimating to be a 25-hour game. I explored a library filled with alchemists who seemed to be different versions of the same person and only some of them attacked. I discovered a forest filled with mushroom platforms, and even ended up in the sewage-soaked depths where an old man stole my map and demanded I chase him. I also got an exclusive early look at an area called The Pit of Eternal Sands.

THE PIT OF ETERNAL SANDS

I was not able to play in the Pit of Eternal Sands, but I did get to see some hands-off gameplay of the location, which revealed new time-bending mechanics. This area is arguably the one most inspired by Sands of Time. Along with the pit being full of sand, everything in this area of Mount Qaf is in reverse. Sargon rides giant waterfalls of sand that are climbing upward, and even enemies move in reverse. When you kill them, you see their spawn animations, and when they come to life to attack, you actually see their death animations. "These are the kinds of things we wanted to do to toy with and surprise our player," Radi says. "Sometimes, these time anomalies are depicted thematically. Sometimes they have a real impact on gameplay."

Footage from The Pit of Eternal Sands also showcased Azdaha, an imposing gigantic cobra boss fight. Like the boss battles I played myself, Azdaha looks challenging, but also the kind of boss that clearly communicates its intentions, which makes it easy to blame yourself for failure rather than the game. In the boss fight, Sargon used a time manipulation ability I was not able to use myself, where he would execute a jump and a mid-air dash but then rewind time to give himself another opportunity to jump in mid-air. Sargon used the ability to get himself out of Azdaha's way, but I also saw him use it while exploring to make disappeared platforms reappear and give himself more time in the air. The mid-air dash Sargon used extensively here also directly references Sands of Time's wall running ability. Sargon can use it without the aid of a wall, but the animation looks almost identical to the 2003 game's animation in a fun, referential way.

THE CREATOR'S BLESSING

Jordan Mechner is Prince of Persia's creator. He developed the first two games and has been involved with the series in some capacity for nearly every entry. He wrote Sands of Time and is also credited as a designer. He also wrote the screenplay for the 2010 film, *Prince of Persia: The Sands of Time*. For The Lost Crown, he is taking a step back, but not too far back. "I'm thrilled that Prince of Persia is getting a new start after so long, from such a great team," Mechner writes in an e-mail inquiring about his thoughts on the game. "I know they've brought a lot of thought and creativity and deep experience to The Lost Crown. I'm really looking forward to playing the final game and discovering all they've put into it."

Mechner also wrote that he's excited to see it return to the 2D perspective and likes the Metroid approach to the structure. He also confirmed a suspicion I had about the game's place in the larger Prince of Persia lore. "The Lost Crown is a new branch of the Prince of Persia franchise, separate from the Sands of Time remake being developed at Montreal," Mechner wrote. "I'm happy for them to coexist."

Mechner currently lives in Montpellier (where the developer is based), so he has had a chance to play it. The most surprising feedback he gave to the team, according to senior producer Abdelhak Elguess, is that Mechner felt The Lost Crown could represent another positive turning point for the franchise in the same way Sands of Time did in 2003. "There's been a lot of desire to bring back Prince of Persia, both from fans and within Ubisoft," Mechner writes. "The Montpellier team, with The Lost Crown, has succeeded in accomplishing what many have wished for."

TIME IS AN OCEAN IN A STORM

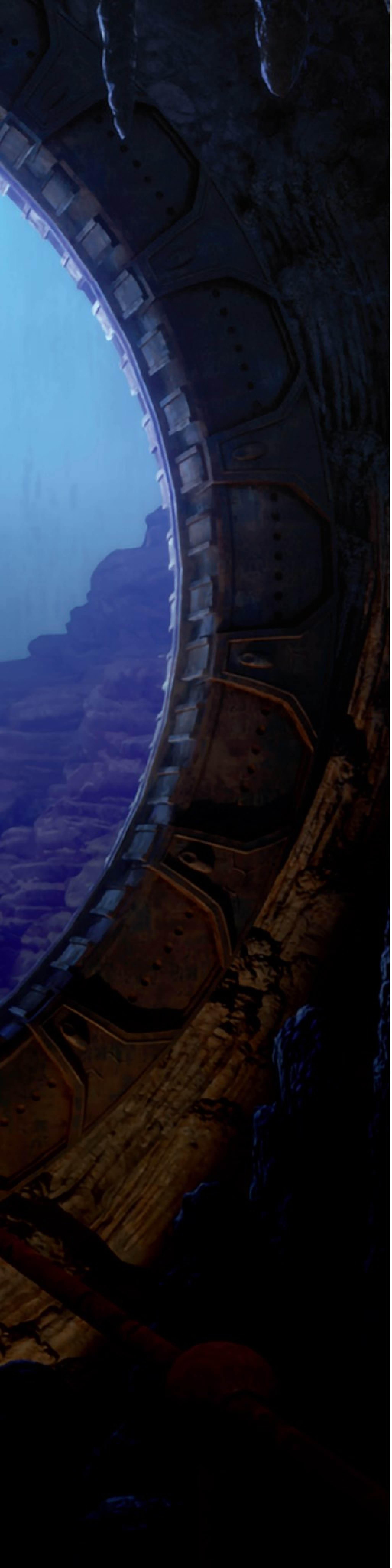
I have a lot of affection for Sands of Time. It was the kind of game I fell in love with so thoroughly that I was disappointed I couldn't run along walls or rewind time when I played subsequent games. The story also felt unique in ways that have become standard. Allowing characters to develop by having personal conversations not necessarily related to the task at hand was uncommon, but the Prince and Farah would do things like discuss their favorite fruit, and the romance that developed over the course of the game felt earned. I played every follow-up sequel and am so grateful the series is finally making a return.

Metroid was not the inspiration I expected to influence the next Prince of Persia, but spending hours with the game has convinced me it is an excellent fit. I am already invested in Sargon and The Immortals, eager to see what happens next in the story, and equally excited to see what abilities will develop over the rest of the game. We are well overdue for Prince of Persia's return, and while I was always hopeful a new entry would be worth the wait, after playing the game, I have confidence it will be. ■

Remaking a Masterpiece

The creators of Riven are reimagining their ’90s adventure game classic – but bigger and better

BY ADAM MORGAN



On Halloween night, 1997, when most kids were out trick-or-treating and teepeeing houses,

I was locked in my bedroom with the lights turned off, hunched over a 40-pound CRT monitor, obsessing over every pixel of Riven: The Sequel to Myst.

I discovered five islands ripped apart by mysterious forces. An ancient civilization with the power to create bridges between worlds with books. A man who believed he was a god. A woman determined to free her people.

Over the next few weeks, I pulled levers, pushed buttons, and unlocked doors until I heard their steam-powered pneumatics in my sleep. I read every journal left behind by the people who lived in Riven. I said "Oh my God" out loud at least a dozen times and gasped in surprise just as often.

If Myst was *The Hobbit* of point-and-click adventure games, Riven was *The Lord of the Rings*. Built by a small studio called Cyan in Spokane, Washington, it had photorealistic graphics on par with its era's Hollywood movies and the narrative intricacy of a novel.

But for many people, it was more than just a technical marvel. It was a life-changing experience.

"I can directly trace my path to the gaming industry back to Riven," says Sam Winkler, narrative director at Gearbox Software and co-writer on Borderlands 3.

"I often credit Myst and Riven as the main inspiration of my creativity today," says David Howe, lead editor of Netflix's *Castlevania* series.

An engineering lead on Diablo IV, Jeff Stewart, says Riven was "the single most inspirational game" he ever played.

But in 1998, a few months after Riven came out on October 31, 1997 – before it sold 4.5 million copies and became the runner-up to Myst as the best-selling PC game of all time until 2002 – the game's three creative leads parted ways.

Rand Miller, the developer who played franchise protagonist Atrus on-screen, stayed at Cyan and became CEO of the oldest surviving independent game studio in America. His brother Robyn Miller, the artist and composer behind many of Myst and Riven's sights and sounds, left the company to pursue other interests. Richard Vander Wende, the production designer of Disney's *Aladdin* who pushed the Millers' sequel to new heights in iconic imagery and character-driven realism, went back to the film industry.

Two decades passed before Rand Miller asked a question. *What if we went back to Riven?*

And then, *What if we made it bigger and better?*

Rebuilding A World

Twenty-six years after the original Riven was released, I arrive in Spokane at the peak of autumn, when the forest surrounding Cyan's headquarters is bright with red and gold leaves. I immediately recognize the front door from Richard Kadrey's 1997 coffee table book, *From Myst to Riven* – an otherworldly arch that looks like it was torn away from the rest of the Arts-and-Crafts-style building by an earthquake.

"The bricklayers loved that," the voice of Atrus tells me. "They said it was the most fun thing they'd ever done."

In person, Rand Miller doesn't remind me of the bespectacled scholar (and questionable father) he's played in six consecutive Myst games. Now 64 years old, with long locks of gray hair and a penchant for Birkenstocks, Miller exudes the easygoing and paternal warmth of a surfing instructor. He speaks with the slightest hint of a southwestern drawl, no doubt from his years living in New Mexico and Texas.

Miller shows me around the House That Myst Built. I see mannequins dressed in costumes from the original Riven, a display case full of awards, and a massive knife prop built by Adam Savage before *Mythbusters* made him famous. In the back of the building, overlooking an algae-filled pond and a grove of ponderosa pines, we reach a conference room with a cyan-blue ceiling.

"Why remake Riven after all these years," I ask.

Miller takes a deep breath. "Riven was sacred to us, so we waited until the technology finally caught up to the point where we could make something that looked even better than the original, but in 3D," he says. "[And] my first thought was, we need to make it look precisely the same."

But then Miller reached out to Vander Wende, the original game's co-director, with a tantalizing question: "If you could *change* anything about Riven, pie-in-the-sky, what would you change?"

Vander Wende arrives at Cyan a little later in the morning, fresh off a plane from Hawaii. He's in his 60s now, too, and tall like Miller but more soft-spoken. He also sounds like every bit of the perfectionist he was in the '90s.

"I can't do something half-assed unless somebody puts a gun to my head," Vander Wende says. Turning to Miller, he continues: "I was really dubious when you approached me about coming back to Cyan. Why would I want to remake something I already did? I never even played the original game after it came out. Doing an imitation of it held no interest for me."

As a result, the new Riven isn't a carbon copy of the original. There are new puzzles, new locations, and new pieces of lore alongside structural changes to make the world more narratively consistent. And this time, it'll be fully traversable in real-time 3D instead of an interconnected series of 4,000 still images and quick time events.

"We looked at the backstory that gave rise to the world of Riven and the characters that inhabited it," Vander Wende says. "We found discrepancies and corrected those and embellished things that needed to be filled in."

I raise my eyebrows. Miller notices. "This is a dangerous question, but when you heard we were remaking Riven, what kinds of things did you *hope* we'd do?" he asks me.

I think about it for a few seconds. I tell him all the parts of the world I wanted to explore more, as well as the two additional worlds we only glimpsed in the original game. I wince, worrying I've just described an impossibly grand vision for the new Riven.

But Miller smiles. "So far? Check, check, check, check."

Rewriting A Memory

"Was there always a stairwell over here?"

I'm exploring Book Assembly Island, also known as Crater Island or Boiler Island. I can hear the turquoise water lapping against the shore of its volcanic caldera and the wind pouring over the cliffs above me. The sky is the same blue I remember from my childhood, but now I can walk anywhere and look in any direction.

Seven or eight "Cyantists," including Miller and Vander Wende, are sitting behind me, watching me play their new version of Riven.

Hannah Gamiel, Cyan's development director and one of the two people who will lead it when Miller retires, informs me that there was not, in fact, always a stairwell over here. I descend into a dark cave, where an entirely new location presents a new series of puzzles, as well as new insights into the world.

Within seconds, I'm lost. "Always follow the pipes," Gamiel says, sitting to my right. "Our games should have been called Follow the Pipes 1 and Follow the Pipes 2."

Gamiel first played Riven when she was 4 years old, sitting in her mother's lap. "I was the designated disc-swapper," she says. The original game was split across five separate CD-ROM discs, one for each island. Gamiel's mother, Robin, would later meet and marry Rand Miller.

Gamiel started working at Cyan in 2013, first in the QA department and then as a programmer. "Those were super lean years," she says of the time before Obduction, the company's Kickstarter comeback in 2016.

Later, elsewhere on the same island, I break into a regal laboratory built by Gehn – Atrus's father, a world-conqueror with a god complex who's been trapped on Riven for decades – only to discover that the interior has completely changed compared to the original game.

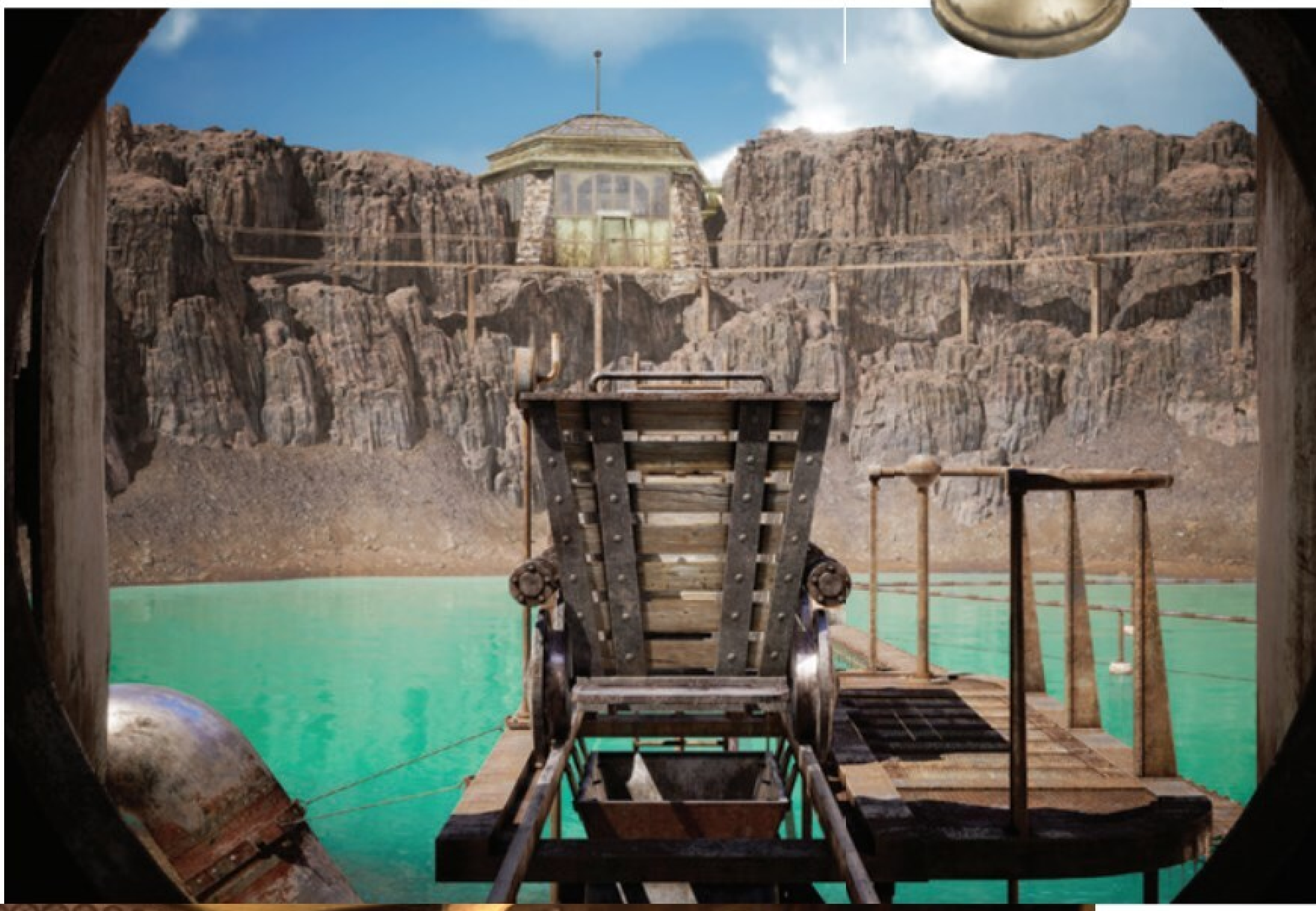
"One of the first things I did when I came back was write a rough outline of Gehn's 30 years on Riven, which we had never done before," Vander Wende says. "Once I did that, it was easier to make decisions [about what to change or add]."

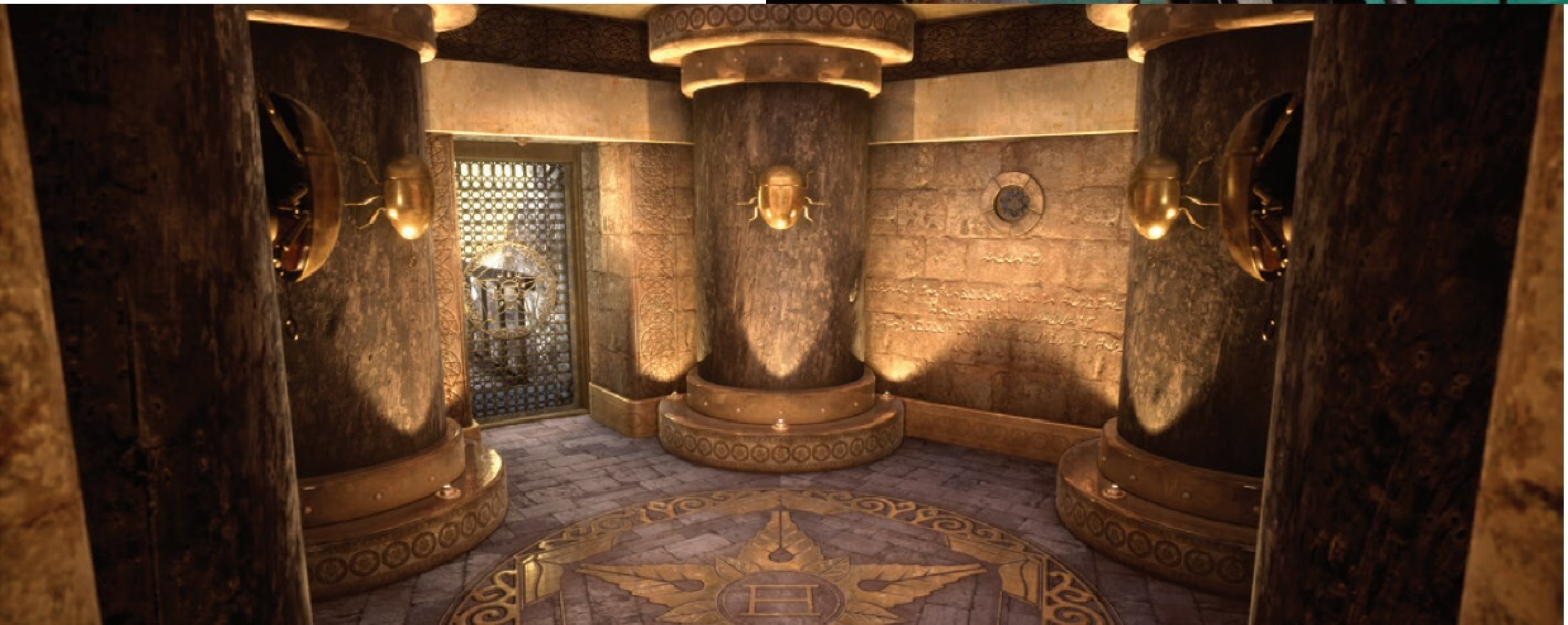
After a white-knuckle ride on Gehn's magnetic levitation tram, I reach the other island Cyan made available during my demo, where Gehn spied on the Rivenese people from a Gothic underwater stronghold. On the surface of the island, one of the structures I remember is missing completely, and there are new puzzles to solve, but Miller assures me the other islands hold even bigger – and wilder – surprises.

"What do you think," Miller asks me. "You're the first person to see any of this outside the company."

I'm stunned. "In some ways, it feels identical to my memory of Riven," I say. "But in other ways, it's like I'm playing it for the first time because there are new places and new things I don't understand."

Vander Wende frowns. "All I can see are the mistakes," he says but laughs along with everyone else.





Technical Difficulties

"It's a puzzle," Miller says.

A few hours later, we aren't in Riven anymore. We're in the Cyan parking lot, and I can't figure out how to open the passenger door on Miller's Tesla Model Y. Vander Wende can't figure it out either, and I think Miller, who is probably one of the most famous puzzle designers in America alongside Will Shortz and that guy who buried a treasure chest in the Rocky Mountains, is sadistically enjoying our confusion.

Once we solve the puzzle (I couldn't tell you how for the life of me now), Miller drives us through the Douglas fir forests north of Spokane to a restaurant for lunch, where I get to know Cyan's creative director, Eric A. Anderson, the other person who will lead the company alongside Gamiel after Miller retires.

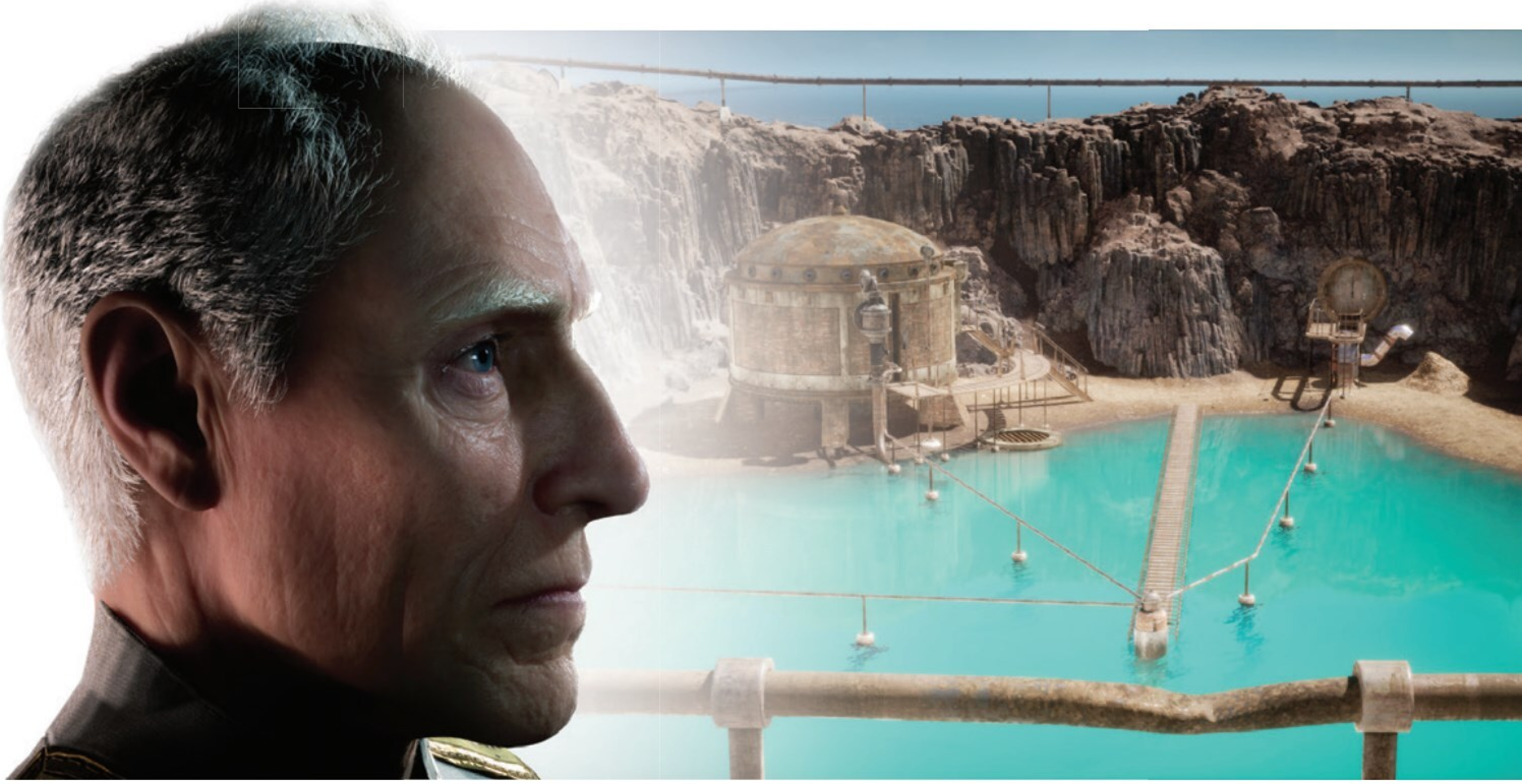
"I stumbled on Cyan when I was in art school collecting issues of *Cinefex* magazine," Anderson tells me. Now in his 40s, he still has the barely bottled energy of a Cyan fan whose dreams have come true. "There was a help-wanted ad in the back that said something like, 'We're making Myst II, and we need 3D artists.'" Anderson emailed Cyan asking if it hired college interns, but fate wouldn't bring him to Spokane until the year 2000 when Miller was spearheading the ambitious, aforementioned MMORPG.

Decades later, in the early days of the Riven remake, Anderson and Gamiel thought they might be able to reuse some of the original game's 3D models, even though most of them had been lost to the tech-death of SGI workstations, the same now-defunct computers that Industrial Light & Magic used to make *Jurassic Park*. But when they finally managed to locate and open a single file from the '90s, it was too low-resolution, forcing them to recreate every inch of the islands from scratch in Unreal Engine 4.

Cyan also met with a grassroots team of Riven fans called the Starry Expanse, which had been painstakingly translating the game's old models into its own version of a 3D Riven for more than 13 years. "We referenced some of their assets for measurements, but they were replicating the old Riven," Anderson says. "Once Richard [Vander Wende] came back, we knew things were going to change, so it was easier to just build everything ourselves."

One of the biggest technical challenges for Anderson and Gamiel has been bringing Riven's characters back to life. The original game featured live-action video performances by several actors, including Rand Miller as Atrus, Sheila Goold and Regina Altay as his wife Catherine, and Royal Shakespeare Company alumnus John Keston as his father Gehn.

But it's literally impossible to graft a 2D video from 1997 into a real-time, high-resolution 3D environment. Cyan's previous remake, 2021's award-winning VR and PC version of Myst,



featured computer-generated characters in lieu of the original live-action performances. "It was… an experiment," Miller laughs, but for the new Riven, Cyan hired a full-time animation lead, Autumn Palfenier, to raise the uncanny valley.

"For Gehn, we tried analyzing the [old] video and tracking certain features, but the resolution was so low, and it's not even a full shot, so it just wasn't doable," Anderson says. Instead, they've been filming performances in Cyan's basement using motion-capture technology.

"I can say on the record that this is a union production with SAG-AFTRA," Gamiel says, referring to the same labor guild that represents Hollywood actors. "We wanted to get some incredible talent into this game."

She won't tell me who's playing who but does confirm that Miller will return as Atrus and that the studio managed to salvage an old audio recording of John Keston, who died from COVID-19 complications in February 2022 at the age of 97. "We had an actor study John's performance and then do it in sync with the original audio, so we got Gehn's full body," Anderson says. They show me a work-in-progress close-up of Gehn's face, which exceeds my expectations.

For Gamiel, working with professional actors has been the most rewarding part of the project. "When I watched some of these performances, I was shook. They brought us to tears. People are going to be impressed."

The Ending Has Not Yet Been Written

Back at Cyan's headquarters, I try to get one more surprise on the record before leaving Spokane behind.

"Can you confirm a release year for Riven?" I ask.

Miller, Gamiel, and Anderson look at each other and make several faces. "It's coming out sooner than people might think," Gamiel says. They also can't confirm or deny (yet) that there are any plans for a VR version, only that it'll be available for PCs.

"After Riven, will we revisit the D'ni universe in a future Cyan game?" I ask, referring to the fictional civilization responsible for Myst and Riven's "linking book" technology, of which Gehn and Atrus are practicing descendants.

"100%," Anderson and Gamiel say in unison. "Star Wars figured out how to tell more than just the story of the Skywalker family, and we're trying to do the same thing," Anderson says. "There are more stories to tell in the D'ni universe that aren't directly about Atrus's family. There are other characters out there that [our fans] are familiar with, and it would be a shame if we didn't leverage those to our benefit."

It's time for me to go, but I keep thinking about something Vander Wende said the day before. "When Riven came out, most of my friends and family didn't play because it was too difficult. I just didn't know whether what we made really meant anything to anyone," he said.

Days later, back at home in North Carolina, my 7-year-old daughter walks up to my desk while I'm writing this story. She notices an image of the original Riven on my second screen – a dramatic vista of a massive golden dome surrounded by vertical sea stacks.

"Where is *that* place?" she asks, her eyes wide.

I almost tell her it's from a video game. I think about playing Myst with my dad and playing Riven with my brother. I think about how happy my mom was when I told her I was flying out to Spokane. I think about Vander Wende, Miller, Gamiel, and Anderson and what it means for art to make an impact on people.

"I'll take you there soon," I say. ■

BAUHAUSIAN RHAPSODY

With Penny's Big Breakaway, Evening Star aims to break away from the rules of tradition by embracing what made the 3D platformer genre's beginning strange and explorative BY WESLEY LEBLANC

PLATFORM PS5
Xbox Series X/S
Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Platforming
PUBLISHER Private Division
DEVELOPER Evening Star
RELEASE 2024

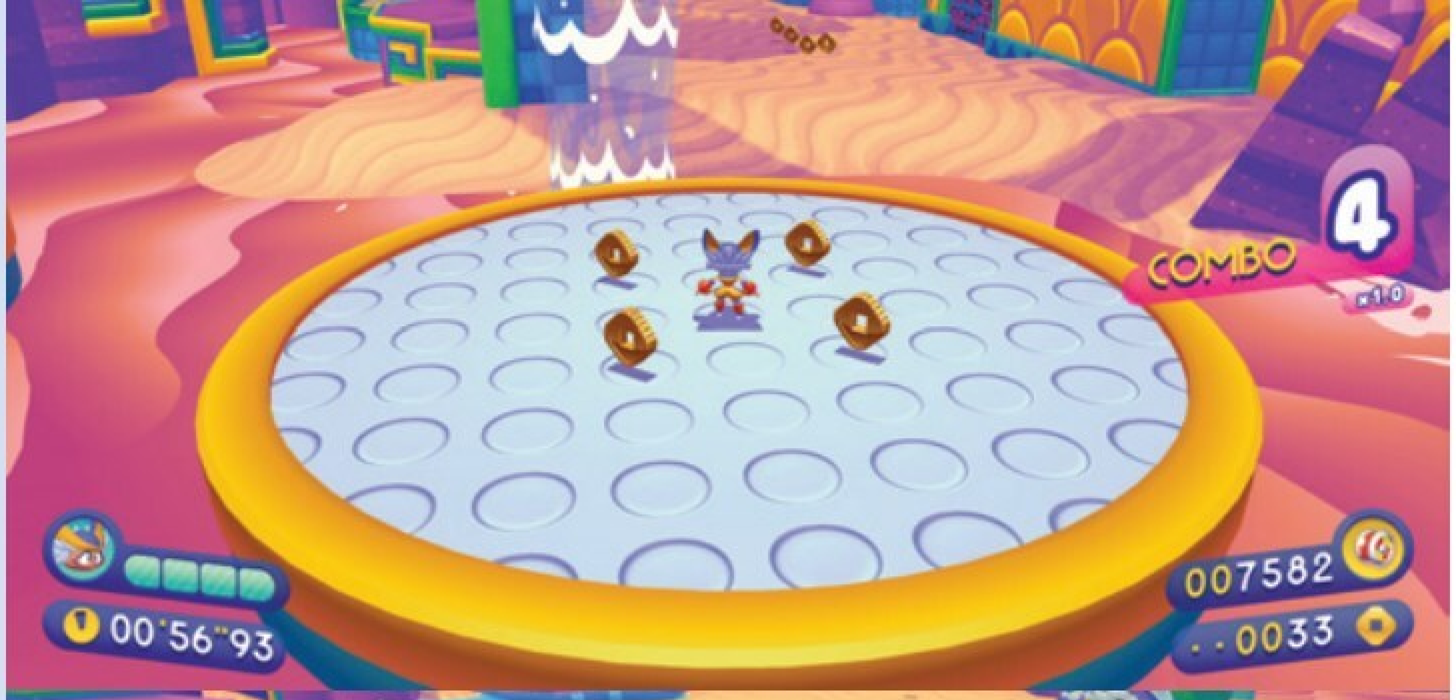
SONIC MANIA IS WIDELY REGARDED as one of the blue blur's best games. More than six years after its 2017 release, that sentiment remains as strong as ever, even after recent outings like 2022's Sonic Frontiers and this year's Sonic Superstars. While published by Sega, longtime Sonic fans who grew up playing the series, like Christian Whitehead, Hunter Bridges, Dave Padilla, Brad Flick, Tom Fry, and others, led the game's development. And without speculating too much, the degree of separation afforded to these fans-turned-developers allowed Sonic Mania to feel like both a fresh breath of air and a return to form.

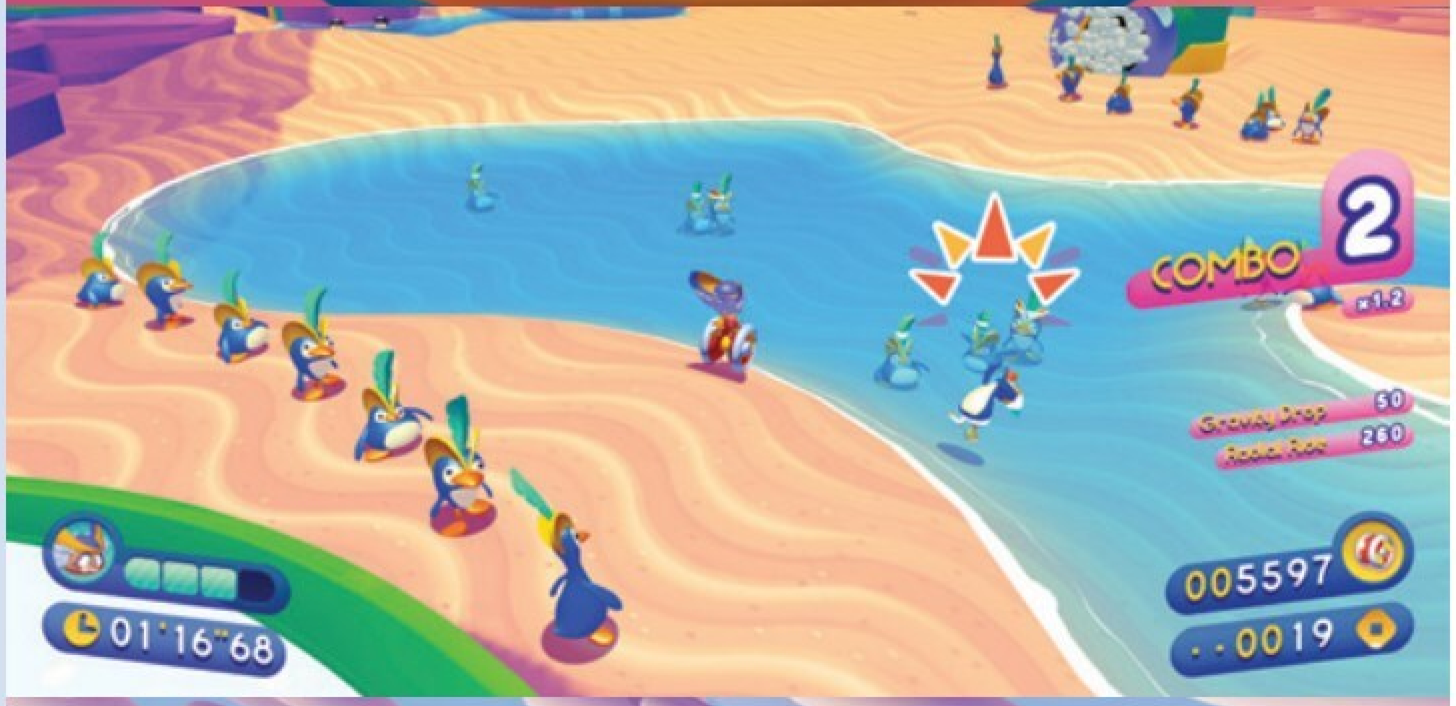
Not wanting to wade too deep into the world of independent contracts and wishing to maintain the friendship between each other strengthened in Sonic Mania's development, the five of them formed Evening Star months after the game's release. Studio CEO and executive producer Padilla, CTO and game director Bridges, creative director and lead engine architect Whitehead, design director Flick, and art director Fry all admit the easy follow-up was right there: A Sonic Mania-type 2D platformer. It's what fans of Sonic Mania wanted, and to their credit, they worked with Sega on potential sequel ideas before amicably parting ways. But, unsatisfied with the easy answer, Evening Star got to work on a 3D momentum-based platformer inspired by Tony Hawk's Pro Skater, an early 20th Century ballet, and 1995's Jumping Flash on PlayStation.

"We always had this idea of, 'Wouldn't it be great if we had a character that could use a yo-yo to do different moves?'" Whitehead says. "Initially, we jotted them down on a 2D playfield, but there were several concurrent themes swirling in the background. At least for me, my perspective as a developer is I've spent the last decade working exclusively on 2D pixel art, so I really wanted to expand and prove that I could do something more than just one particular genre."

Whitehead says he's aware Penny's Big Breakaway is another platformer but says it's a different flavor in a different dimension. After playing more than two hours of the game myself, experiencing the first three of 11 regions in the world of Macaroon, including three different boss stages and special Star Globe bonus levels, that much is clear. Knowing the development leads of Sonic Mania are responsible for what I play, it's impossible to deny the momentum-based inspiration that lives in both titles. But Whitehead's right – even beyond the obvious shift from 2D to 3D, Penny's Big Breakway features a different flavor. It is not just a new flavor for these developers but something unique in the long-standing platforming genre.

↘ Evening Star





BREAKING THE STANDARDS

I'm terrible at the game, at least for the first handful of stages. It doesn't help that I just watched Bridges speed through them like someone with intimate knowledge of every stage's challenges, but I'm slow and struggle to combo yo-tagonist Penny's yo-yo-based moves across ramps, flag poles, gaps, and more. Penny can toss her yo-yo forward to attack enemies and break barrels with a button on a controller or, more curiously, by flicking the right stick in a direction. And that directional input is independent of Penny, meaning you can flick the yo-yo to her right while she walks left. It's admittedly bizarre at first – not because it doesn't feel good, but because it's so different from how I typically interact with the combat and moveset of a 3D platformer mascot.

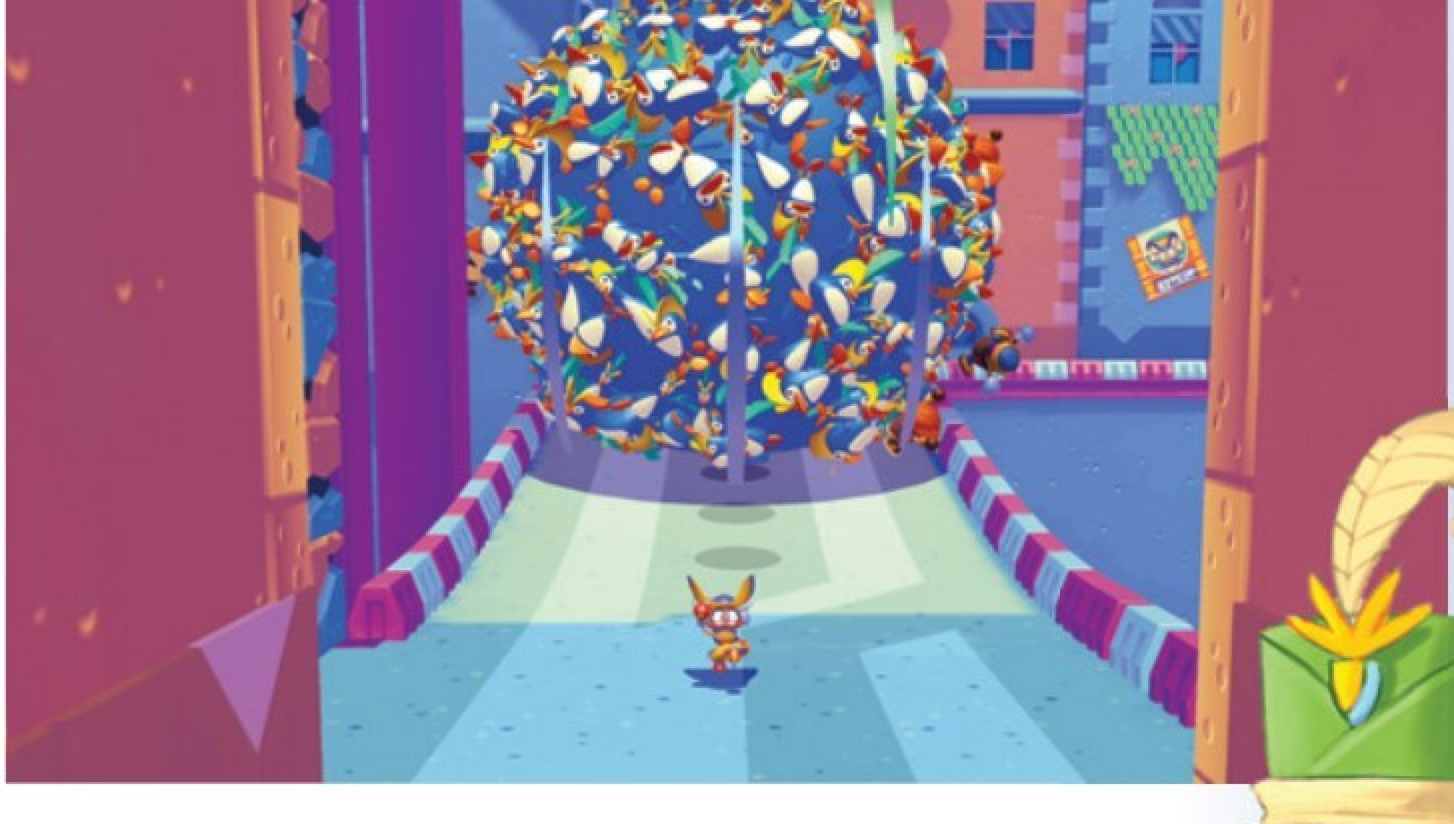
In the same vein, Penny can double jump, but instead of gaining a good amount of height with a second jump, she gains a barely noticeable amount; the purpose of her double jump isn't height but a stop in momentum, Bridges tells me. She can dash by tossing her yo-yo forward, performed by flicking the right stick in the same direction twice, and she can swing left and right, forward and backward, on her yo-yo anywhere in the air as well.

Although it takes me some time – something I welcome because it's rare to experience a new moveset that challenges my preconceptions of a genre – I finish my Penny's Big Breakaway play time with the realization that it's not a 3D platformer in the vein of something Nintendo might create, another challenged preconception. On the one hand, it's a Tony Hawk's Pro Skater-inspired platformer with an emphasis on momentum that will appeal heavily to speedrunners and time trial fans, with a constant score and Devil May Cry-style combo tracker on the right side of the screen, too. On the other, it's a team's love letter to the weird and sometimes broken platformers of the 3D genre's early days. Together as a complete package, it rules.

"The rules [of 3D platformers] at that stage weren't really established that well," Whitehead says. "I remember growing up playing a lot of PlayStation games where they were maybe a bit rough around the edges but trying to grapple platforming mechanics in 3D, and I felt really inspired by that era. I experienced that as a kid, but I wanted to experience that as a developer."

A ROUNDTABLE PHILOSOPHY

Whitehead, admitting creative selfishness, says he wanted to try and make a PlayStation-style 3D platformer that fixes the problems he experienced growing up with the genre. The small slice I've played proves Evening Star is on the right path. But in speaking to others within Evening Star, like Bridges, Fry, Flick, and Padilla, it's clear everyone is all-in on that idea. Even Fry, the art director on paper, says he was involved in all kinds of decisions outside of his development realm, a philosophy everyone else expresses too. "The collaborative effort is an intrinsic part of the team," Fry says. "Not one person has an idea and everyone follows them like the Pied Piper with it. It's something where we believe everyone has something of value to throw



into the pot, and with the art, that's certainly no different. I refer to it as a roundtable philosophy."

That collaborative energy even made its way into the so-far-amazing score of Penny's Big Breakaway, which utilizes a wide range of weird synthesizer instruments, instrumentation from genres like Latin and Calypso, and more to create a jazz-like symphony of music. Bridges, Whitehead, and others in the team contributed to the score in various ways, even after Evening Star hired Streets of Rage 4 and TMNT: Shredder's Revenge composer Tee Lopes, who the team also worked with on Sonic Mania, and Sean Bialo to create the score.

PERFORMANCE ART

If one aspect of Penny's Big Breakaway speaks most to its early PlayStation inspiration, it's the art direction. Inspired by the early 20th Century Triadisches Ballett and the Germanic Bauhaus art movement from the same period, combining colorful abstract ideas with primitive geometry, the world of Macaroon feels like one big performance. Your social status is defined by the performance you can give to denizens of the world. Every stage ends with a "Busker" bonus that requires quick and accurate QTE sequence completion to add additional points to your total score. Within each stage are three denizen challenges, like collecting four missing tax forms for an electric company while riding Penny's yo-yo like a unicycle, and during the Busker bonus, the denizens you help watch you perform.

Even the conceit of the narrative speaks to the idea of performance art being everything – Penny attends a talent show after finding a special yo-yo with an insatiable hunger and, instead of wowing the emperor with a showstopping performance, the yo-yo eats the emperor's clothes. She spends the rest of the game running further and further away from the emperor and Macaroon's capital, chased to the world's edges by the emperor's ever-present penguins, only temporarily slowed by your efforts and never outright defeated.

"We want the game to keep the flow and dribble going," Bridges tells me. "We really wanted to have that rhythm [...] and never interrupt that. It's a game where the most skilled players can theoretically make it through a level in an unbroken string of moves. That's Penny's masterful performance."

That's why Evening Star controls the camera at all times, which requires a flip in my brain. With three denizen challenges to complete and three Show Pieces to find in each level, I want to explore every nook and cranny. But without camera control, I can't, and I hate this at first. It's only after realizing that if Evening Star isn't allowing the camera to take me here or there, then there isn't anything to miss that I begin to play on the team's terms. This switch is freeing, realizing Penny's platforming playground is predicated on my ability to keep moving forward to where Evening Star was taking me in its design. With thoughtful movement and a keen eye, completing every challenge and finding every Show Piece feels intrinsic to Penny's "performance" in each stage.

The game clashed with every notion I had of 3D platforming. I wanted to take things slow; I wanted to search every corner for something; I wanted to take my time. But Penny's Big Breakaway is a welcome antithesis to everything (mostly) Nintendo had taught me about this genre. It's a bold design choice and one I would have called risky on paper. In talking with Evening Star, it's clear it understood that risk going into its first original game and IP. However, each member I spoke to expressed humble confidence in their respective facets of the game's development.

"There are a lot of skills we really excel at when making games, and a lot of specific nuances we bring to the table because of our team dynamic and our tools, and I don't think it's going to be a complete surprise," Padilla says. "I think a lot of folks are going to see this as something completely new and something completely original, but in terms of what we've done before and what we're doing now, and hopefully what we're doing in the future, folks are going to be able to connect the dots." ■

Top Ten Games of 2023

From beginning to end, 2023 was a standout year for games. Every month brought a new selection of games impressing with creativity, technical sophistication, artistic depth, and design brilliance. Tiny indie teams competed with massive triple-A projects for the attention of the gaming public. The result was one of the most enjoyable years of new games in a long time.

This month, we're celebrating the very best of those games that crossed our screens over the last year. Read ahead to discover the projects we felt rose above the fray, earning our highest praise, and read on in the pages that follow to discover genre winners, individual editor favorites, and of course, your reader picks.

by
Game Informer staff

STREET FIGHTER 6

BEST
Fighting,
Competitive

10

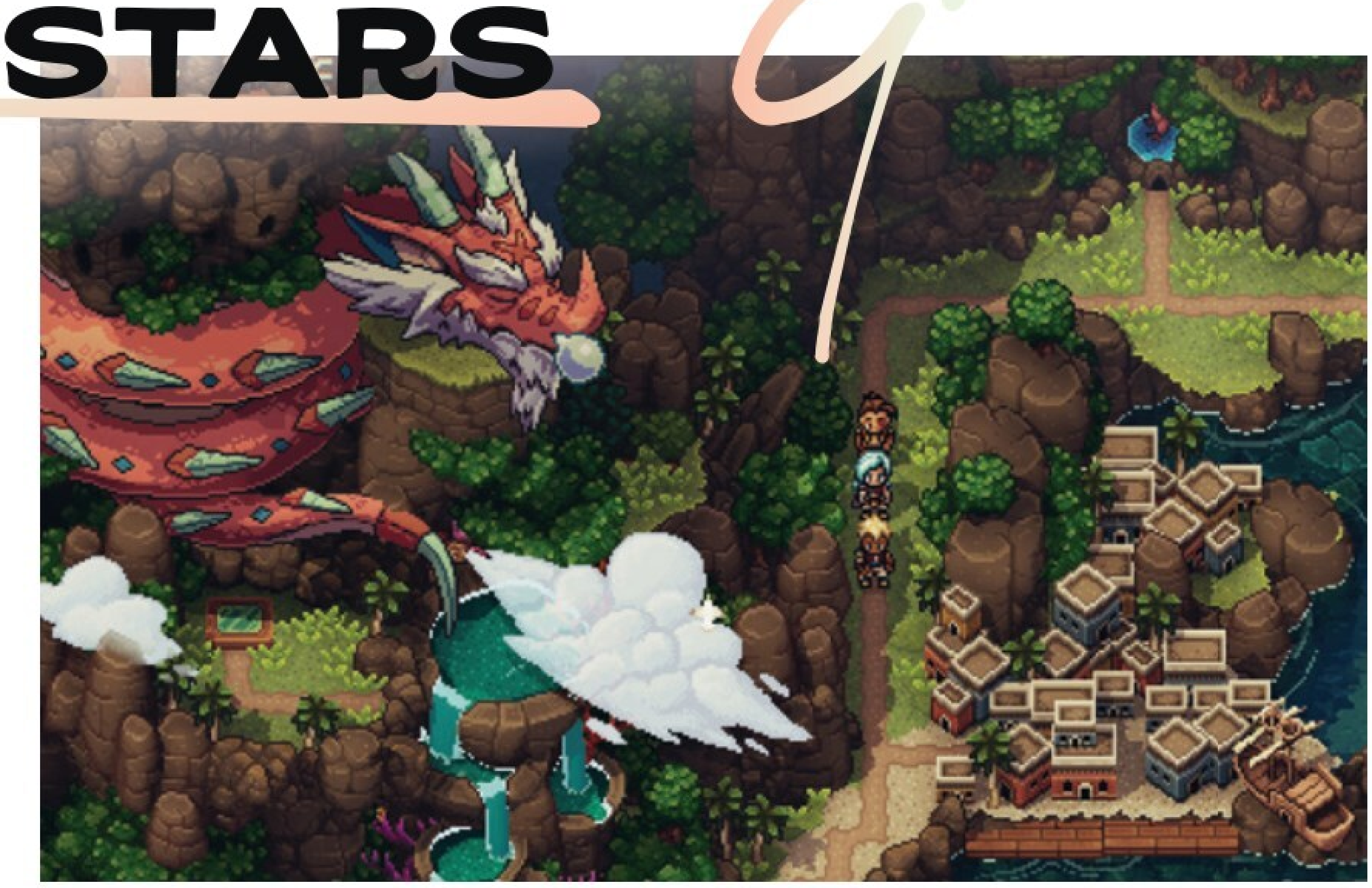
Street Fighter 6 practically overcorrects on Street Fighter V's mistakes. Instead of a bare-bones launch, it packs a ton of cool features from the get-go. The biggest is World Tour, a goofy and enjoyable single-player campaign letting us hang out with the main cast and fight bizarre strangers in a surprisingly large sandbox.

Of course, the one-on-one fighting is the franchise's bread and butter, and it's as fun and polished as ever. Thanks to the new Drive System, we loved playing new twists on old favorites like Ryu, Chun-Li, and Guile while falling in love with newcomers such as Kimberly, Manon, and Jamie. Best of all, every Shoryuken, Flash Kick, and Hundred Hand Slap looks fantastic, thanks to the game's fluid animations and colorfully vibrant graffiti paint effects.

Superb onboarding features such as simple yet robust tutorials ensure even rookies can catch up to veterans in no time. And even if they don't, the streamlined inputs of the new Modern control scheme flatten the playing field, allowing newcomers to hold their own while letting experienced players go all out. Testing those skills in the online battle hub recaptures the old-school thrill of creating arcade rivalries with friends and strangers alike. Street Fighter 6 is the year's best fighter and one of the finest in the genre's history.

SEA OF STARS

9



Sea of Stars follows the journey of two fated warriors and their childhood friend as they fight the forces of destiny to defeat immortal quarreling beings. The story is as large as the adventure, and it wears its Chrono Trigger and Super Mario RPG (among other games) inspirations on its sleeves, crafting a consistently joyful throwback experience. The fantastic art style and excellent music (featuring work from famed Square Enix composer Yasunori Mitsuda) make Sea of Stars feel like that fantastic RPG from your childhood that you never got around to playing.

But even with all the inherent nostalgia, it feels like a contemporary RPG with excellent modern combat, fun movement, and a thrilling pace. This isn't an RPG where you need to spend time grinding just to see what happens next, but you can take a break to go fishing if you want.

The indie scene is full of games playing in the sandbox of your childhood video game memories. Sea of Stars isn't unique in that way, but the reason it makes our top 10 is how well developer Sabotage executed delivering an RPG experience even better than what we remember while still feeling like it was born of another era. Even if you have no nostalgia for the RPGs that inspired Sea of Stars, it's still worth spending time with Solstice Warriors Valere and Zale and their friend Garl.

JUSANT

8

Jusant succeeds by being wholly singular. From the jump, you have one goal: climb up. Everything else is in service to that one objective.

Perhaps an obvious statement, but this is most apparent – and most interesting – in the game's mechanics. Developer Don't Nod put serious thought into translating the act of mountain climbing onto a video game controller; you control each hand individually, when you climb up, where to create anchor points, and so on. It asks you to think about each movement you make and consider your path forward. In that way, it's a puzzle game, but one that neatly mimics the physicality of the sport it borrows from.

Not unlike Death Stranding did for hiking in 2019, Jusant is all about the labor of movement and the careful consideration of navigating natural terrain. That's a unique position for a game to be in. A lot of games want movement to feel effortless; it helps create the fun. But Jusant's fun lies in its arduousness, in completing complex challenges that take time and careful consideration. And it does so with shocking success.

Jusant is unlike much else, and it's sure to be one of the hidden gems of 2023 – and maybe one of the hidden gems of Don't Nod's catalog, which is mostly known for its narrative adventure games like Life Is Strange. But if you're itching for a different experience, you'd be remiss not to take this climb.

7

SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

BEST Platforming, Family

If there was an award for the most aptly named video game of 2023, it would go to Super Mario Bros. Wonder. With this latest entry in one of the most iconic franchises in gaming, Nintendo successfully instilled an unrivaled sense of wonder and excitement around every corner. Even as players move through 2D platforming stages in the most well-worn convention in video games, Super Mario Bros. Wonder brims with creativity and surprises.

The core platforming feels as good as Mario ever has, but Wonder is perhaps most notable for the deviations it makes from the base franchise formula. Whether it's the gameplay-modifying Badge system or the all-new power-ups like the Elephant Fruit, Super Mario Bros. Wonder takes the long-running series in exciting new directions.

However, the stars of the game are the eponymous Wonder Effects, which transform the stage (and sometimes our heroes) in zany and novel ways. Perhaps the most impressive part is that these Wonder Effects happen in every single mainline level. These absurdly creative transformations kept us on our toes as we eagerly anticipated what awaited us in future levels.

Those Wonder Effects combine with the expectedly stellar level design that has kept the Mario franchise the genre leader for nearly four decades. The result is one of the best games in one of the most beloved series, easily earning a spot among the greatest releases of 2023.

6

STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

In many ways, Star Wars Jedi: Survivor is the *Empire Strikes Back* of Respawn's single-player Star Wars series. The story is darker and more mature, the setpieces are bigger and more impressive, and it expands on its predecessor in virtually every way. Though some games reset their protagonist's abilities between entries, Cal Kestis starts with most of his upgrades right off the bat, and feeling his toolset of combat and traversal abilities somehow expand even further is satisfying. Lightsabers feel better than the first game, allowing you to switch between multiple stances on the fly. It helps that there's a generous level of enemy variety to pit your skills against.

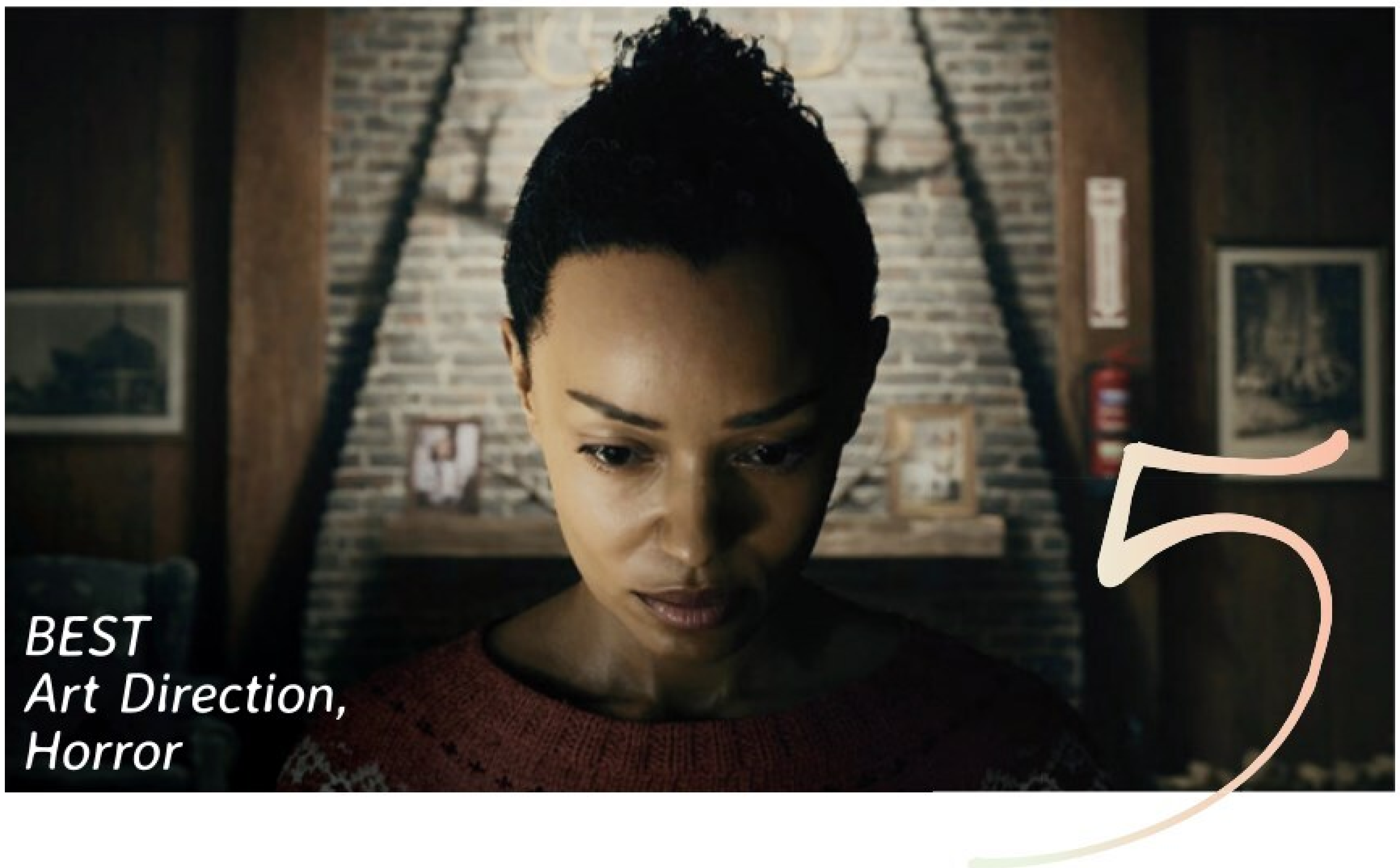
The worlds are gorgeous but also much bigger, giving the game an open-world quality while retaining its focused, linear storytelling. And that narrative stands out as one of the best of the year. It all culminates in a breakneck ending sequence that's not only some of the most thrilling gameplay of 2023, but also some of the best Star Wars content of the last decade. Star Wars Jedi: Survivor is a story about looking for hope, struggling to find it, and learning how to come out on the other side. Enhanced by striking performances from Cameron Monaghan, Debra Wilson, and Noshir Dalal and a moving, series-authentic soundtrack, we'll be thinking about this take on a galaxy far, far away for a long, long time.

ALAN WAKE 2

Alan Wake 2 shouldn't exist. It's a big-budget survival horror with a "2" in its title that's a sequel to a 13-year-old game. It lacks the straightforwardness, linear storytelling, and deluge of bombastic action we've come to expect from the triple-A space, instead delivering a gorgeously claustrophobic and strange *True Detective*-inspired mystery about art and what words and pictures on a page do for reality.

Like a sleeve on a new book, the subdued restlessness of Alan Wake 2 wraps itself around the rest of the experience, which itself is an intense third-person shooter. Every encounter feels taut, be it a well-designed level of stress built into its mechanics through limited ammo and sturdy enemies, the uncomfortable sight of its monsters, or the game's use of flashlights. The result is a unique survival horror experience set in a moody Pacific Northwest and Neo-noir-drenched New York City.

Narratively, Alan Wake 2 succeeds as a well-made closure to the titular author's story that started in 2010 and is satisfying for even series newcomers. It's a feat only developer Remedy Entertainment could pull off, and even then, only after a 13-year departure from the Alan Wake series to explore the weird and occult in games like Quantum Break and Control. And we're glad Remedy did, because Alan Wake 2 is one of the year's most impressive titles with some of 2023's best moments, too.



BEST
Art Direction,
Horror

5

RESIDENT EVIL 4

The Resident Evil 4 remake had the unenviable task of living up to its namesake's legacy: one of the most important – not to mention best – games of all time.

Against all odds, it pulled it off.

Resident Evil 4 is a masterclass in action game design; from the opening to the credits, it's paced down to the millisecond to be scary, exciting, action-packed, and even a little funny. This is no easy feat, considering just how much stuff happens in the RE4 campaign; it'd be easy to make a bloated mess. And yet, developer-publisher Capcom not only lived up to the original game's legacy but made an action game leagues better than most of its competition.

Under no circumstance is the Resident Evil 4 remake remotely as important or impactful as the original game – it's likely not even close to the most important game of this year – but it does offer a unique perspective the originator can't: that of hindsight. As we wrote in our review of the game, it allows us to see "decades of lessons learned throughout the game industry about how to make a third-person action game thrilling, fun, and mechanically effective reapplied to the source material." It also invites new players to see why Resident Evil 4 is so special. For that, it's a game you can't miss. That it's more fun than a remake has any right to be is just the cherry on top.

BEST
Remake

4

MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

BEST
Sony Exclusive,
Action

©2023 Marvel

Marvel's Spider-Man 2 is a powerful exclamation point to Insomniac's trilogy of web-swinging epics. In MCU-like fashion, spending two games building up Peter and Miles as individuals before bringing them together pays off with two well-developed heroes out of the box tackling a pair of menacing threats in the forms of Kraven and Venom.

Insomniac made its already great web-swinging several times more fun thanks to the addition of web wings. Gliding between swings is thrilling; it may be the most entertaining set of traversal mechanics we've ever experienced. An expanded New York City features more meaningful sidequests that plant tantalizing seeds for future stories and villains. Tack on improved combat thanks to a bevy of new Symbiote and Venom attacks for Peter and Miles, respectively, and Marvel's Spider-Man 2 rivals Batman's Arkham Games for the best comic book action.

While perhaps the weakest narrative in the series, the story still packs an intense and, at times, emotional wallop. Watching Peter and Harry Osborn's believable friendship get tested by the symbiote's presence gripped us, but seeing Miles come into his own steals the show. The young hero continues to be an inspiring force for good in his community while serving as an endearing emotional rock to Peter, earning his keep as *the* Spider-Man. Regardless of whose mask we're wearing, Marvel's Spider-Man 2 is superhero nirvana.

BALDUR'S GATE 3

Dungeons & Dragons has been around for decades, but thanks to the release of its fifth edition in 2014, a film adaptation, and other appearances in pop culture, the game's had a massive resurgence in the last 10 years. It's only natural – and perhaps, inevitable – that a proper video game adaptation of D&D's new core rules would be produced, but for a game based on human imagination and unpredictability, that's no easy task. And yet, miraculously, Baldur's Gate 3 from Larian Studios is a triumph.

True to the tabletop game that inspired it, BG3 offers unprecedented freedom of choice, not just allowing for a variety of outcomes, but anticipating them with a staggering 174 hours of cinematics, most of which will not be seen in a single playthrough. The narrative branches according to the player's success and failures, often in surprising ways that pay off dozens of hours later. That depth of storytelling is most evident in the cast of companions that deliver performances of a lifetime, each with uniquely compelling stories and romantic arcs, should you choose to pursue them. The world itself is one of the most densely designed in all of gaming; with side quests and treasure buried around every corner, exploration is consistently deeply rewarding. Larian's latest is a turning point in the history of RPGs, and its influence will be felt for years. Put simply, Baldur's Gate 3 is a critical success.

BEST
Narrative,
Role-Playing,
Cooperative

1

Best

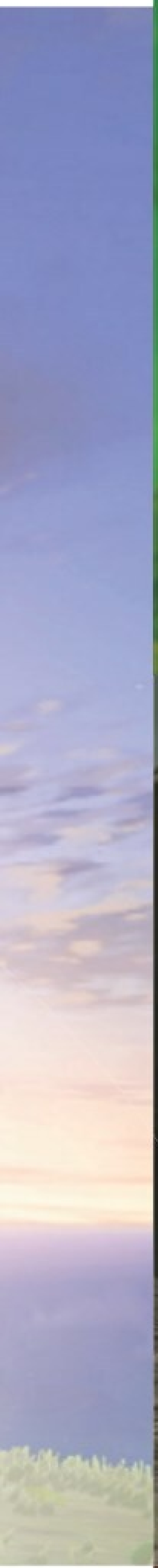
Game of the Year, Nintendo Exclusive

THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

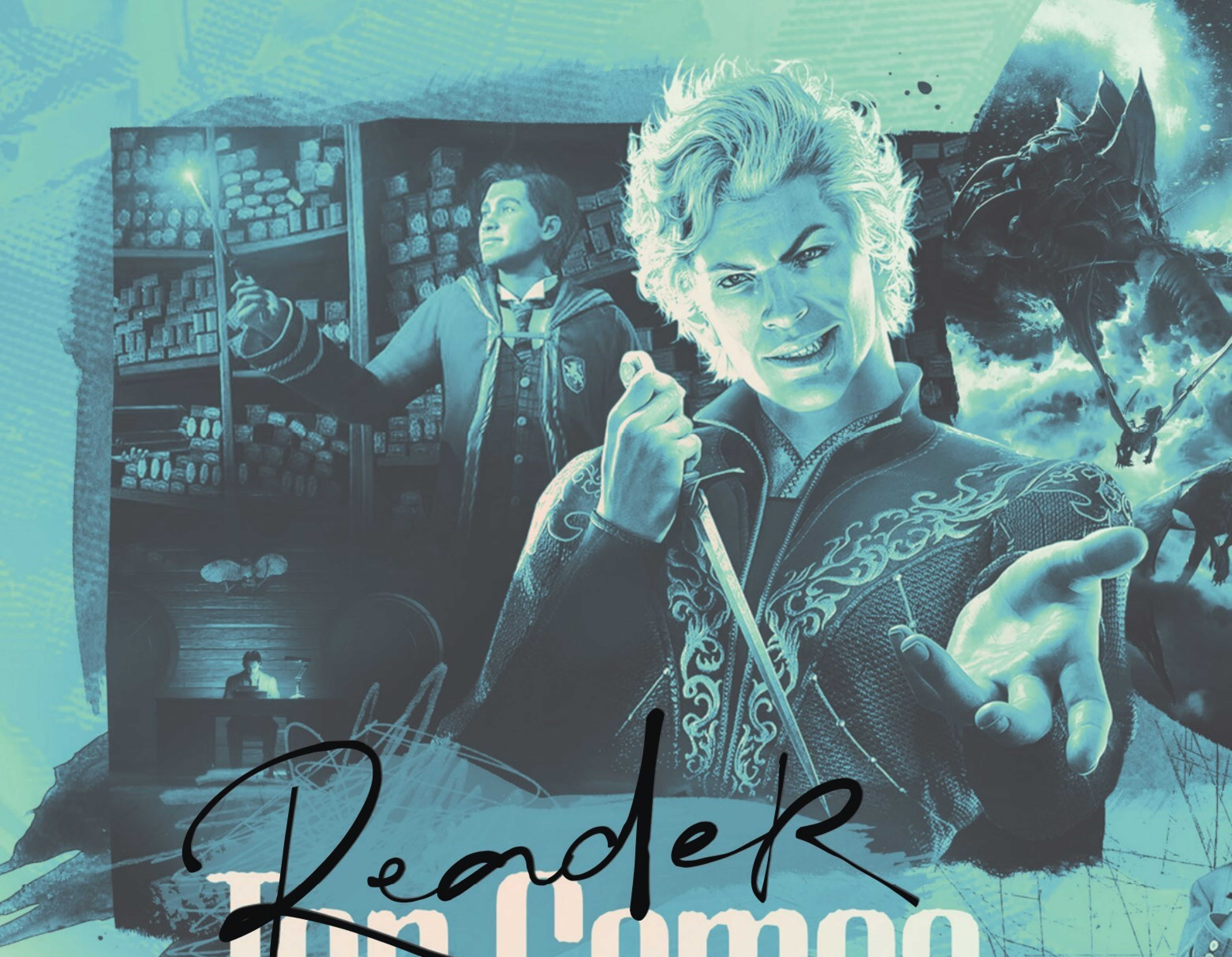
The lead-up to the release of Tears of the Kingdom was an exciting but sparse affair. Nintendo shared surprisingly little about the game before launch, so most went into the game with unsure expectations. Would Tears of Kingdom feel like a Breath of Wild expansion? Will weapons still break? What is Ultrahand? The overt secrecy paid off, though, as Nintendo managed to craft a revelatory follow-up to arguably one of the best video games it ever made with an experience that managed to both maintain what worked about the first game and make you reimagine everything you thought you knew about this instance of Hyrule. The number of excellent games released this year often felt impossible to rank in our debates, but Tears of the Kingdom still managed to come out on top, despite the difficult competition.

From the typical Zelda perspective, everything feels right in Tears of the Kingdom. Hyrule is familiar but filled with new secrets. Every dungeon and shrine has creative puzzles with interesting solutions. Leaping into the air with the paraglider is better than ever. All of those elements are great on their own, but the introduction of Ultrahand was the revelation none of us predicted. Somehow, Nintendo crafted an interactive tool that lets you do whatever you want in a setting that encourages players to bend the game to their will. Using Ultrahand is a creative exercise in cheating but without the nagging guilt of doing something wrong. And the most incredible part of Ultrahand is everyone uses it differently. No solution is incorrect, and everyone is a genius.

Ultrahand is the kind of mechanic that comes along rarely and changes how you perceive all subsequent video games. Alongside it (with a collection of other fun tools like Ascend, Recall, and Fuse) is an adventure with an engaging narrative and one of the best conclusions the Zelda franchise has ever received. The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom surprised us, made us feel smart and creative, and inspired thousands to become virtual engineers with incredible creations of their own. For all those reasons, it earns *Game Informer*'s 2023 game of the year. ■



GOTY



Reader Top Games of 2023

This year represented one of the most difficult game of the year discussions we've had in some time; 2023 was overflowing with fantastic games. But our opinions are not the only ones. For a few weeks, beginning November 17, we ran a poll online, and readers sent their top five favorite games of 2023. We used ranked positional voting – the Borda count method – to gather the results below. If you have opinions on your opinions, send us an e-mail at feedback@gameinformer.com.

01 BALDUR'S GATE 3

02 THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM

03 MARVEL'S SPIDER-MAN 2

04 ALAN WAKE 2

05 RESIDENT EVIL 4 (REMAKE)

06 HOGWARTS LEGACY

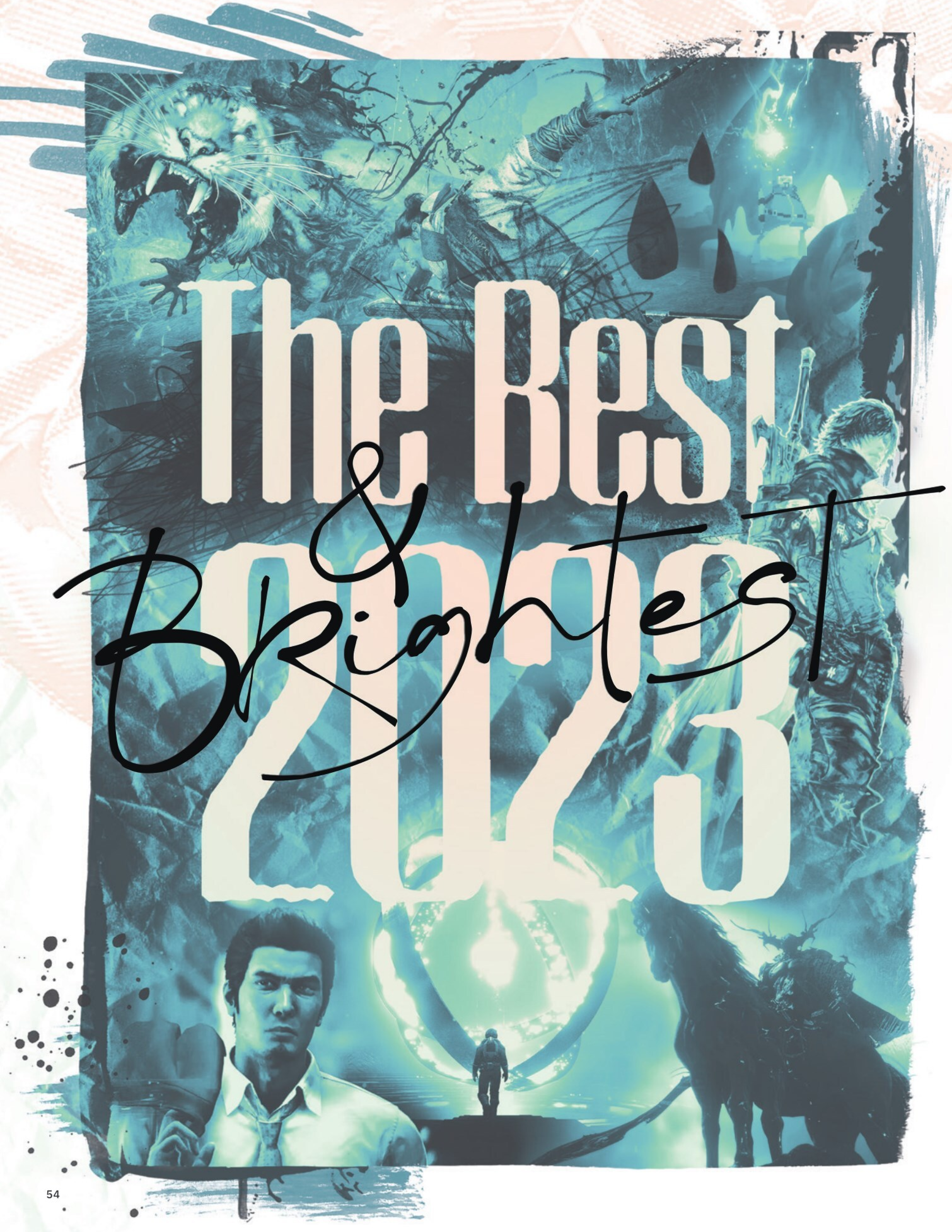
07 FINAL FANTASY XVI

08 REMNANT II

09 SUPER MARIO BROS. WONDER

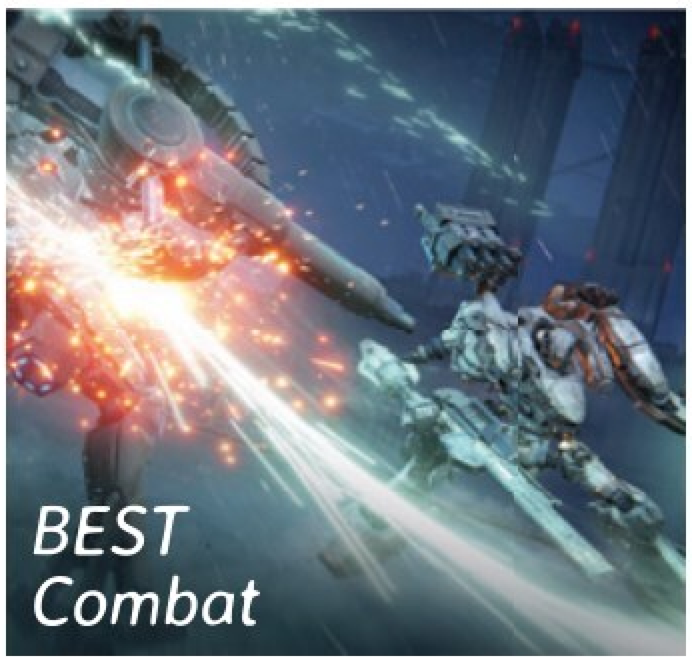
10 STAR WARS JEDI: SURVIVOR

The Best & Brightest 2023



Before the year concluded, discussions were already percolating about whether 2023 was the best year for video game releases ever. It was a challenging year for the industry as a whole (see p. 8 for our year in review covering the unprecedented number of layoffs that hit the industry), but in terms of artistic output, 2023 is absolutely a contender. Whittling down our favorites to just 10 was particularly difficult, which is why our best and brightest section is here to detail the other games that we also loved but didn't quite make it to the top. You can also find our individual editor top 10s to determine whose taste aligns with yours.

by
Game Informer staff



ARMORED CORE VI: FIRES OF RUBICON

Armored Core VI's combat is defined by grace. Despite its blistering pace, you never feel out of control. The game constantly flexes around how you want to approach the tools you bring onto the battlefield, only building upon the highly responsive combat mechanics, making for an experience that feels authored by you.

EDITOR PICK

Dave the Diver

Few 2023 games surprised me or left me so consistently thrilled and engaged more than Dave the Diver. The novelty didn't just come from the concept – you must scuba dive to catch seafood you subsequently serve in the sushi restaurant you're managing – but also the near-constant influx of new ideas, mechanics, and story elements. Dave and his quirky staff are consistently entertaining, the approachable mechanics are easy to grasp, and everything you do is plain fun. Dave's journey isn't like any game you've ever played, which is precisely why it's worth a shot. *– **Matt Miller***

EDITOR PICK

Disney Illusion Island

Dlala Studios uses Mickey and Minnie Mouse, Donald Duck, Goofy, and more to create one of the year's best platformers. Catering to the joy children find in simply seeing their favorite mouse mascot and the nostalgia their parents might have for Disney's most famous characters, Illusion Island is a treat for the eyes, ears, and hands. Controlling the gang feels great, as does moving through its platforming-focused world. The entire package is brought to life by the actual current voice actors of these characters and a delightful score, making Illusion Island a must-play Switch title.
*– **Wesley LeBlanc***

Best
Expansion/DLC

CYBERPUNK 2077: PHANTOM LIBERTY

Phantom Liberty is an excellent epilogue to CDPR's admittedly rocky journey through Night City and a reminder that this studio makes exceptional RPGs. Alongside its 2.0 revamp, the now-final Cyberpunk 2077 package is home to great storytelling, expansive and exciting gameplay, some of the genre's best explorable spaces, Idris Elba's Solomon Reed, and more.

EDITOR PICK

Pikmin 4

The long-in-development fourth mainline Pikmin game ended up being worth the wait. Nintendo is no stranger to both iterating for a sequel and changing and adding new elements. The core, excellent Pikmin design is still strong, but the addition of the adorable alien puppy Oatchi makes it the best in the series. Managing big groups of Pikmin is easier than ever, and the world design is the best it's ever been. Even if the previous Pikmin didn't sing for you, I encourage you to give this one a shot.
– ***Kyle Hilliard***

EDITOR PICK

Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon

"Pleasant surprise" doesn't begin to describe this delightful prequel to the Bayonetta series. Guiding the young Cereza and her demonic partner Cheshire through a beautifully illustrated storybook world is a treat thanks to the whimsical level design and the warm guidance of the narrator. Fun environmental puzzles and an inventive tag-team-based combat system make simultaneously controlling the would-be heroes a treat. Tack on a better-than-expected story with strong performances, and you have one of Bayonetta's strongest outings yet. – ***Marcus Stewart***

BEST
Puzzle Game

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE II

The Talos Principle II is a great follow-up, boasting over 100 well-crafted puzzle rooms we had a blast unraveling. A fascinating, choice-driven story tackling philosophical discussions on the morality of consciousness and existence makes for one of the most intellectually thoughtful games of 2023.

EDITOR PICK

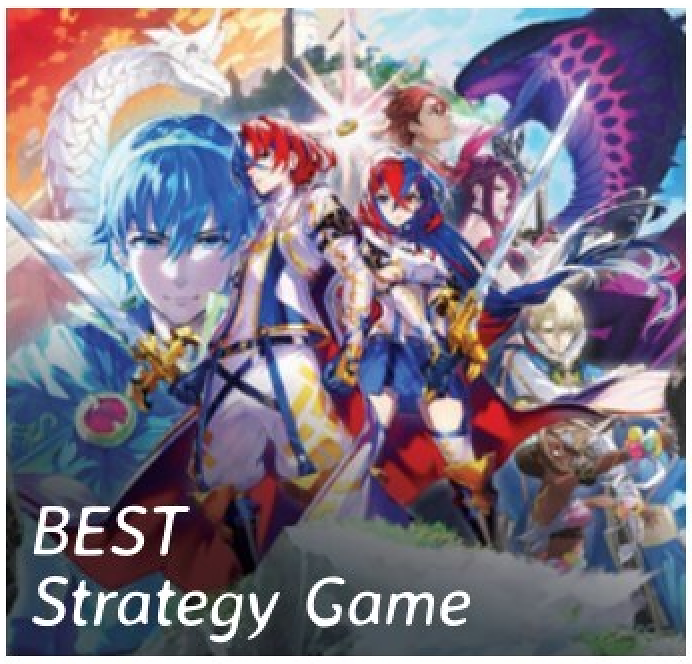
Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty

Developer Team Ninja has formed an interesting niche for itself in the last few years. Alongside its bread and butter (Dead or Alive and Ninja Gaiden), it's also released a number of impressive From Software-inspired games like Nioh and Stranger of Paradise: Final Fantasy Origin. Its latest From-like, Wo Long, takes place during a heightened version of the end of the Han dynasty era of Chinese history, which turns out to be a great setting to play with its exciting, counter-based combat and fight against its imposing bosses. – ***Kyle Hilliard***

EDITOR PICK

Tchia

Developer Awaceb crafted a satisfying, beautifully presented adventure filled with breathtaking natural vistas, a lyrical musical score, and an inherently feel-good vibe. At the same time, the game is a love letter to the studio founders' home – the remote land of New Caledonia. Players control a young and mischievous girl with a big heart and a lot of courage, and her quest through both real and magical encounters sets the game apart. Like visiting the remarkable landscapes of that distant locale, Tchia is a departure from expectation into a place of calm, joy, and positivity.
– ***Matt Miller***



FIRE EMBLEM ENGAGE

The Fire Emblem Engage package amazes, including its heartfelt story, but the star of the show is its expertly crafted strategy RPG combat, which brings back the series' rock-paper-scissors formula to great effect. Everything else ties back into the action of battle, too, making for an unforgettable strategy experience.

EDITOR PICK

Lies of P

Many have tried to emulate From Software's Soulslike games, but none have done so as masterfully as Lies of P. With its hard-hitting, fast-paced combat that requires the utmost precision in quick blocks and parries, its beautifully rendered Bloodborne-inspired take on *The Adventures of Pinocchio,* and a style of storytelling others in the genre could take a cue from, Lies of P is one of the year's best games. Developer Neowiz pulls off what I thought might be impossible by creating not just an excellent take on the Soulslike but a unique and original one that I actually prefer to some of From's own. – ***Wesley LeBlanc***

EDITOR PICK

Like a Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name

For all the over-explaining developer Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio likes to do in its Like a Dragon (formerly Yakuza) series, it left a notably big question mark in the events between Yakuza 6: The Song of Life and Yakuza: Like a Dragon. Mainly: If protagonist Kazuma Kiryu had to fake his death to save his family, why on Earth is he still the star of the show? Luckily, Like a Dragon Gaiden: The Man Who Erased His Name, on top of having a hilariously long title, fills in the gaps – and does so with one of the most affecting endings in the series' long history. *– **Blake Hester***

BEST
Microsoft Exclusive

HI-FI RUSH

Tango Gameworks' surprise hit set the tone for 2023 thanks to its ingenious blend of stylish action and rhythm music wrapped in a gorgeous presentation reminiscent of the best Saturday morning cartoons. We tapped our toes to the beat as often as we smiled at Chai and his endearing band of rebels.

EDITOR PICK

Mortal Kombat 1

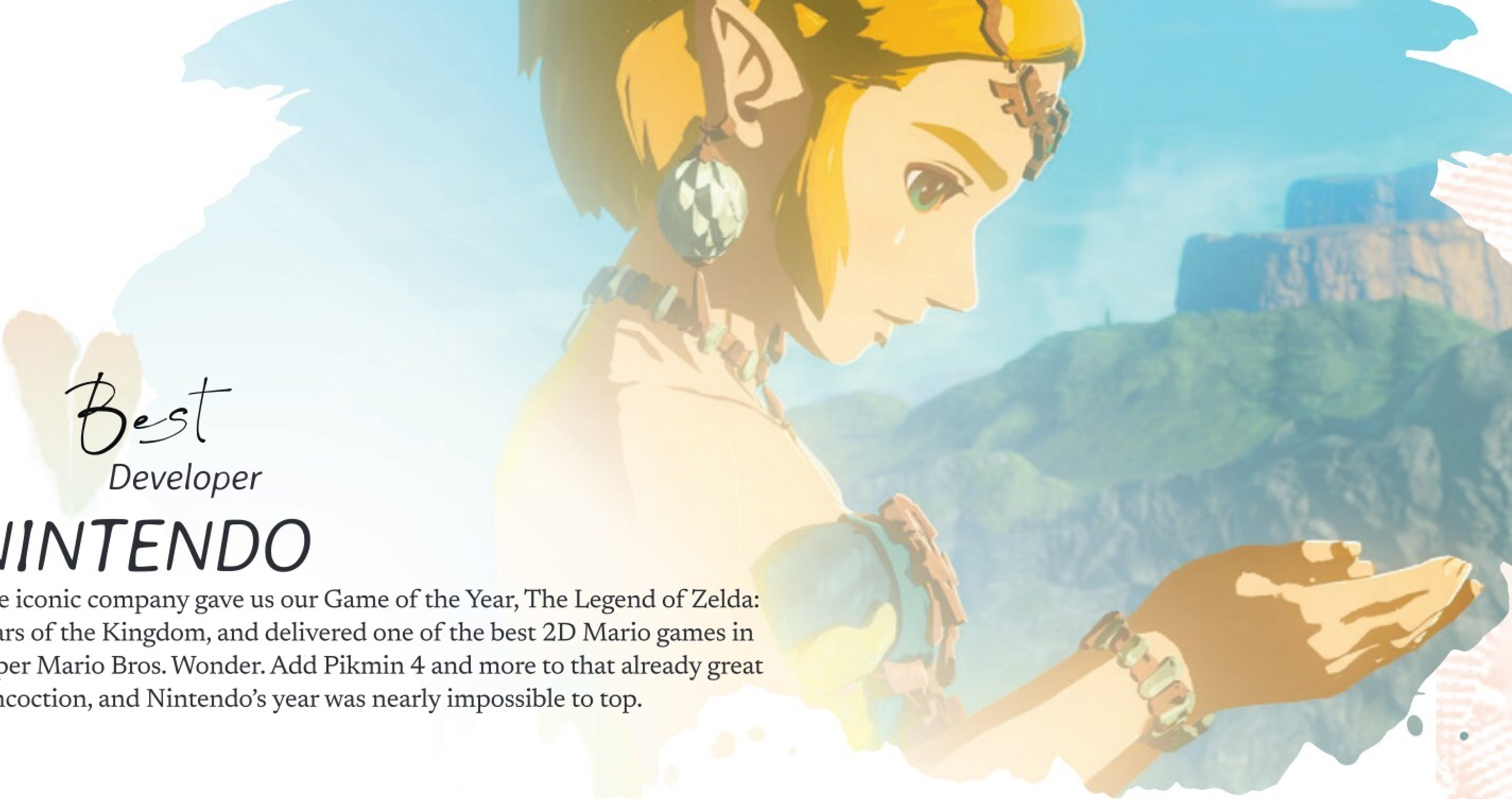
Since its reboot in 2011, the Mortal Kombat franchise has pushed the storytelling in fighting games forward in ways no other series has. With Mortal Kombat 1, another soft reboot, NetherRealm Studios once again upped the ante for what players should expect from their fighting game story modes. While the narrative itself gets messier than the Fatalities by the time it all wraps up, the fun adventure with several fan-favorite characters features astounding production values. That's not even mentioning the terrific fighting mechanics and the fun Kameo system, which make Mortal Kombat 1 well worth your time.

*– **Brian Shea***

Best
Publisher

CAPCOM

Capcom was on its game in 2023, successfully remaking the already stellar Resident Evil 4, launching the best fighting game of the year in Street Fighter 6, and surprising skeptics with the entertaining Exoprimal. Capcom's renaissance shows no signs of slowing down.



Best
Developer
NINTENDO

The iconic company gave us our Game of the Year, The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom, and delivered one of the best 2D Mario games in Super Mario Bros. Wonder. Add Pikmin 4 and more to that already great concoction, and Nintendo's year was nearly impossible to top.

EDITOR PICK

Diablo IV

Blizzard's latest return to its acclaimed fantasy universe serves up a bleak and terrifying world where humanity is trapped in a never-ending war between heaven and hell. Even within that darkness, the developer presents an eerily beautiful game world filled with opportunities for looting, leveling, and adventure. Diablo IV excels at offering a near-constant flow of new places to explore and activities to undertake, a feat made even more impressive by Blizzard's ongoing efforts to keep the monster-slaying going post-launch.
– Matt Miller

EDITOR PICK

Immortals of Aveum

Mainstays like Call of Duty dominate the first-person shooter genre, and rarely do these games focus solely on single-player experiences. Immortals of Aveum does just that, though, mixing fantasy magic with FPS gunplay to create an exciting debut from Ascendant Studios. It's commendable enough to make a 15-hour shooter that uses magic in place of guns and even more admirable to do so as a single-player experience void of the battle passes, purchasable cosmetics, and multiplayer components that govern the genre these days. Above all that, though, Immortals of Aveum is a reminder that the FPS still has plenty of creative space to explore. *– Wesley LeBlanc*

BEST
Boss

BAHAMUT FIGHT
(FINAL FANTASY XVI)

What begins as a catastrophic city-scale fight with the Bahamut Eikon escalates to the cosmic scale, pitting gods against each other to the backdrop of space, with awe-inspiring visuals and stunning sequences to match. In a year with some truly excellent boss battles, Final Fantasy XVI's fight with the king of dragons soars above the rest.

WELCOME TO BRIGHT FALLS

Best
Moment

ALAN WAKE RECAP
(ALAN WAKE 2)

Few studios understand big-budget video game storytelling like Remedy Entertainment – and even fewer dare to be so bold. Halfway through Alan Wake 2, you play a recap of the first game. It just so happens to be a live-action [redacted] featuring choreographed [redacted] and brutal combat.

EDITOR PICK

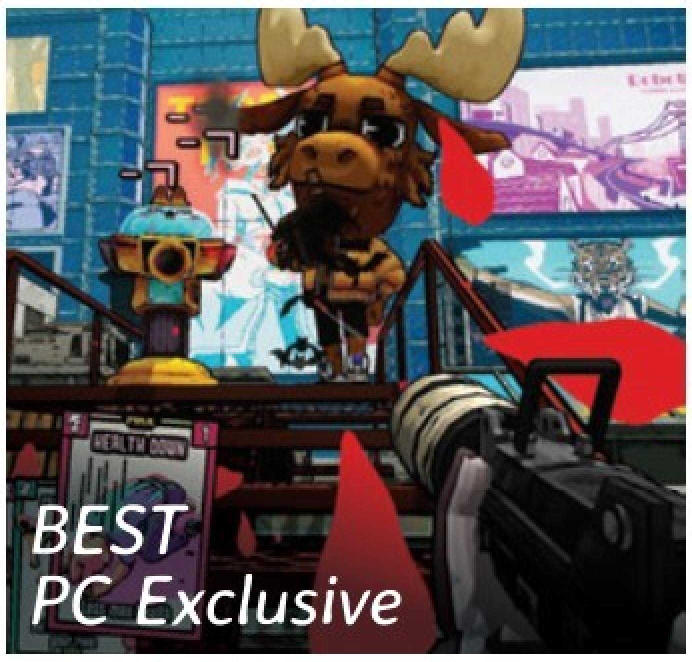
Viewfinder

From the moment Sad Owl Studios revealed Viewfinder's unique puzzle mechanic, it was clear it had created something special. By taking photos of the environment and superimposing those images on said environment, players manipulate their surroundings to make progress and solve puzzles. It is a hugely impressive mechanic to see in motion and the resulting game smartly layers additional twists on top without ever getting too confusing or complicated.
– Kyle Hilliard

EDITOR PICK

Dead Space

The bar for horror games in 2023 was high. It was even high for the sub-genre of horror video game remakes. But even up against Alan Wake 2 and Resident Evil 4, the Dead Space remake brought something exciting and terrifying to the table, even if it wasn't totally new. Seeing Isaac's horrifying adventure brought to life with 2023 visuals and sound design was a thrilling experience, and all the changes made to the game are commendable. We don't know if a Dead Space 2 remake is in the works, but we definitely want more. *– Kyle Hilliard*



BEST
PC Exclusive

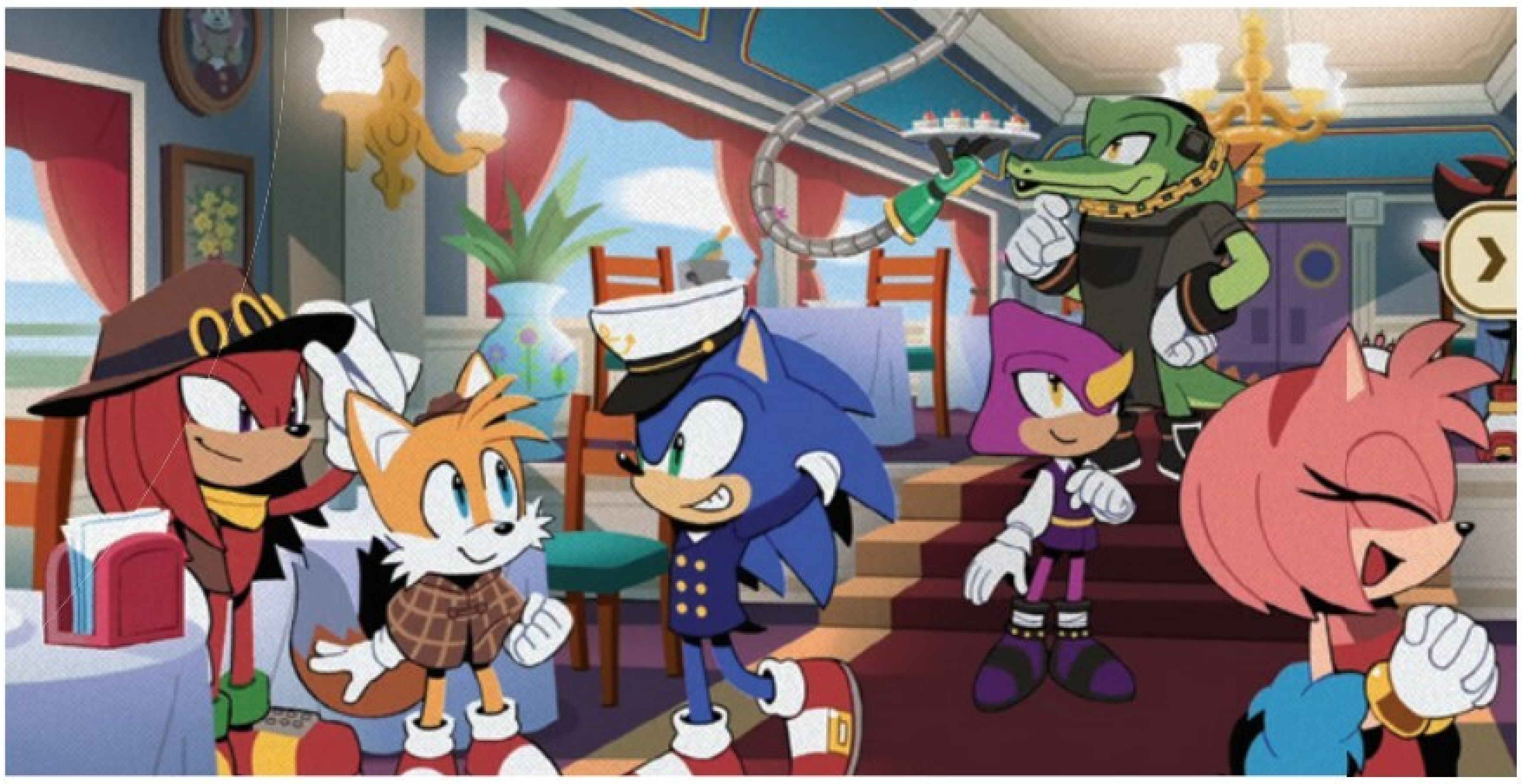
FRIENDS vs. FRIENDS

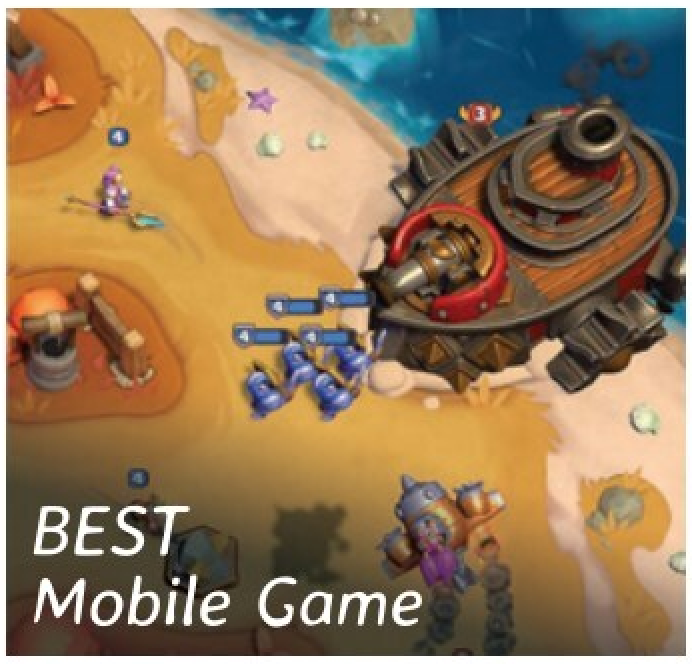
Developer Brainwash Gang's inventive card-based first-person shooter cultivates a novel experience in the competitive multiplayer space. Play randomized cards from your deck to execute potent combos, like pairing the Big Head debuff alongside the sniper card to gain an advantage on unprepared enemies, all within wonderfully colorful arenas.

EDITOR PICK

The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog

This year, Sega released one of the most elaborate April Fools' jokes of all time: a playable game about the death of Sonic the Hedgehog. It's a funny idea on the surface, but those who booted the game up were greeted with an actually fantastic visual novel about Sonic and pals having a murder mystery party gone wrong. From the hilarious writing to the surprisingly catchy soundtrack, The Murder of Sonic the Hedgehog is a short and sweet adventure that was one of the best surprises of the year. Did we mention it's free? *– Charles Harte*




BEST
Mobile Game

WARCRAFT RUMBLE

Blizzard's real-time strategy game delights. In head-to-head tower defense scenarios, two players vie for control over the map by securing segmented lanes with Warcraft-themed miniatures. Battle it out in distinct arenas inspired by early World of Warcraft locations like Elwynn Forest and Stranglethorn Vale while earning fun tabletop interpretations of beloved characters.

EDITOR PICK

Hogwarts Legacy

The excitement around this year's trip to the 19th century of the Wizarding World was dampened for many by the real-life public comments about the trans community by series creator J.K. Rowling. But there's no denying the skill with which developer Avalanche Software managed to adapt the setting into video game form. Hogwarts Legacy is a lengthy and thoughtfully crafted quest across the grounds of the titular castle and its environs, filled with spell-casting, broom-flying, and countless secrets. It was the fulfillment of a deep desire to live and discover this magical world from the inside.

– Matt Miller

Best
Original Score

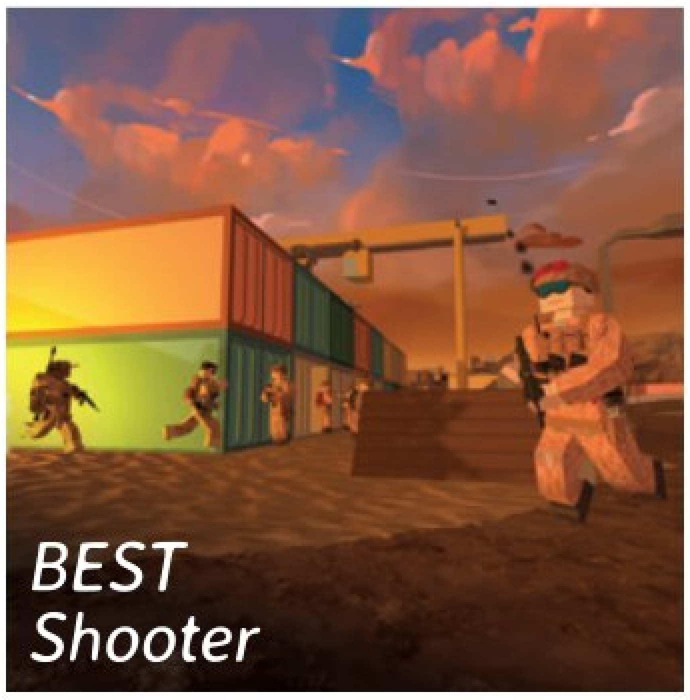
FINAL FANTASY XVI

The bar for Final Fantasy music is high, but its most recent entry has exceeded it. From explosive boss fights to quiet moments at the hideaway, the music team for Final Fantasy XVI fired on all cylinders. The score enhances the best parts of the game, and it's one we'll be humming for years to come.

EDITOR PICK

Super Mario RPG

In a year when a new generation connected with Mario for the first time through the animated movie, it seems like a wise decision on Nintendo's part to release an updated version of the mustachioed hero's earliest RPG. Minor but important adjustments help the game stand toe-to-toe with comparable modern RPGs, but the original's weird and wonderful characters and situations remain happily intact. I found it satisfying to recall fond memories but enjoyed it even more as a chance to share a love of Mario's zany antics with new Mario fans in the family. – ***Matt Miller***



BATTLEBIT REMASTERED

Created by a team of three independent developers, BattleBit Remastered harkens back to the days of Battlefield 1942's massive class and vehicle-based multiplayer. Supporting up to 254 players, this low-poly shooter supports large-scale destruction and proximity chat, leading to moments of hilarity whenever your squad has to narrowly to escape a falling building.

EDITOR PICK

Humanity

Humanity bends your brain into knots. Each level's premise is simple on paper: guide rows of moving humans to a goal. But Humanity takes that idea and crafts it into incredibly clever puzzles that, upon first blush, always leave you scratching your head. Until the inevitable moment it clicks together, and you find the key to the proverbial lock. It doesn't hurt that watching the never-ending seas of people move in your Rube Goldberg-like machinations is incredibly satisfying, and the game's story has interesting questions about what, in fact, it means to participate in Humanity. – ***Blake Hester***

EDITOR PICK

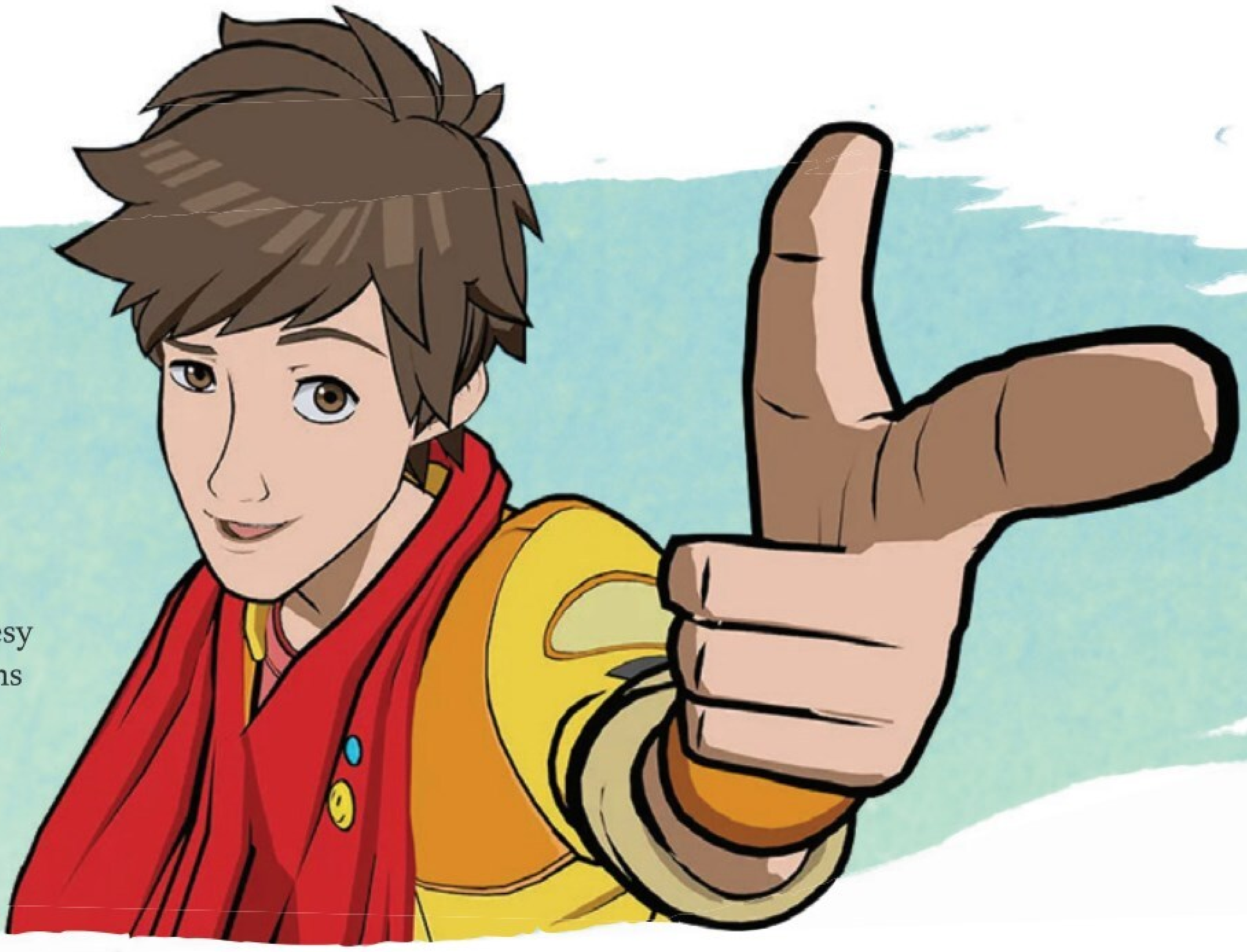
Assassin's Creed Mirage

The Assassin's Creed series has been on a consistent trend toward ever more sprawling game worlds. In contrast, Mirage returns the franchise to its roots, challenging players to navigate a single ancient city while hiding in plain sight and gradually taking out enemies of the Hidden Ones. The simplified concept was a welcome departure but didn't add up to an overly simple experience. Challenging and well-crafted missions and beautiful art direction made Mirage a joy to discover. With its take on the Golden Age of Baghdad, Ubisoft remains adept at nailing that feeling of dropping into and being immersed in a specific moment of history. – ***Matt Miller***

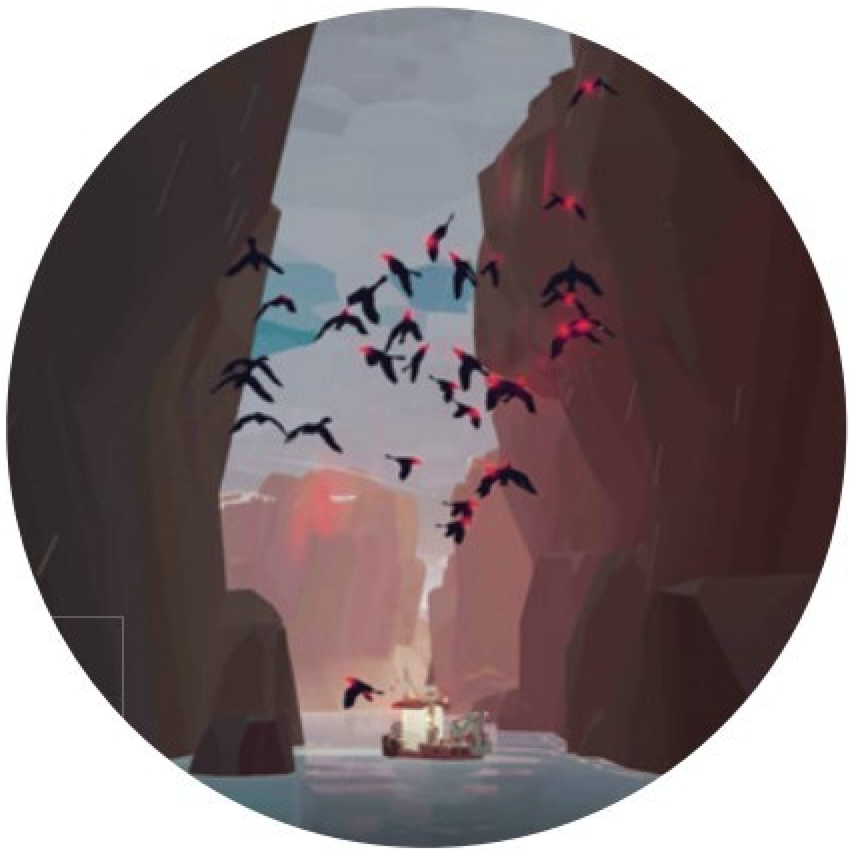
Best
Dork

CHAI (HI-FI RUSH)

Chai's wannabe attitude is more than a personality trait – it's the tone driving the whole game forward. The cartoonish presentation pairs perfectly with his cheesy grin and constant wisecracking. Facepalms and eyerolls at his excessive enthusiasm cement his Best Dork victory.



EDITOR PICK



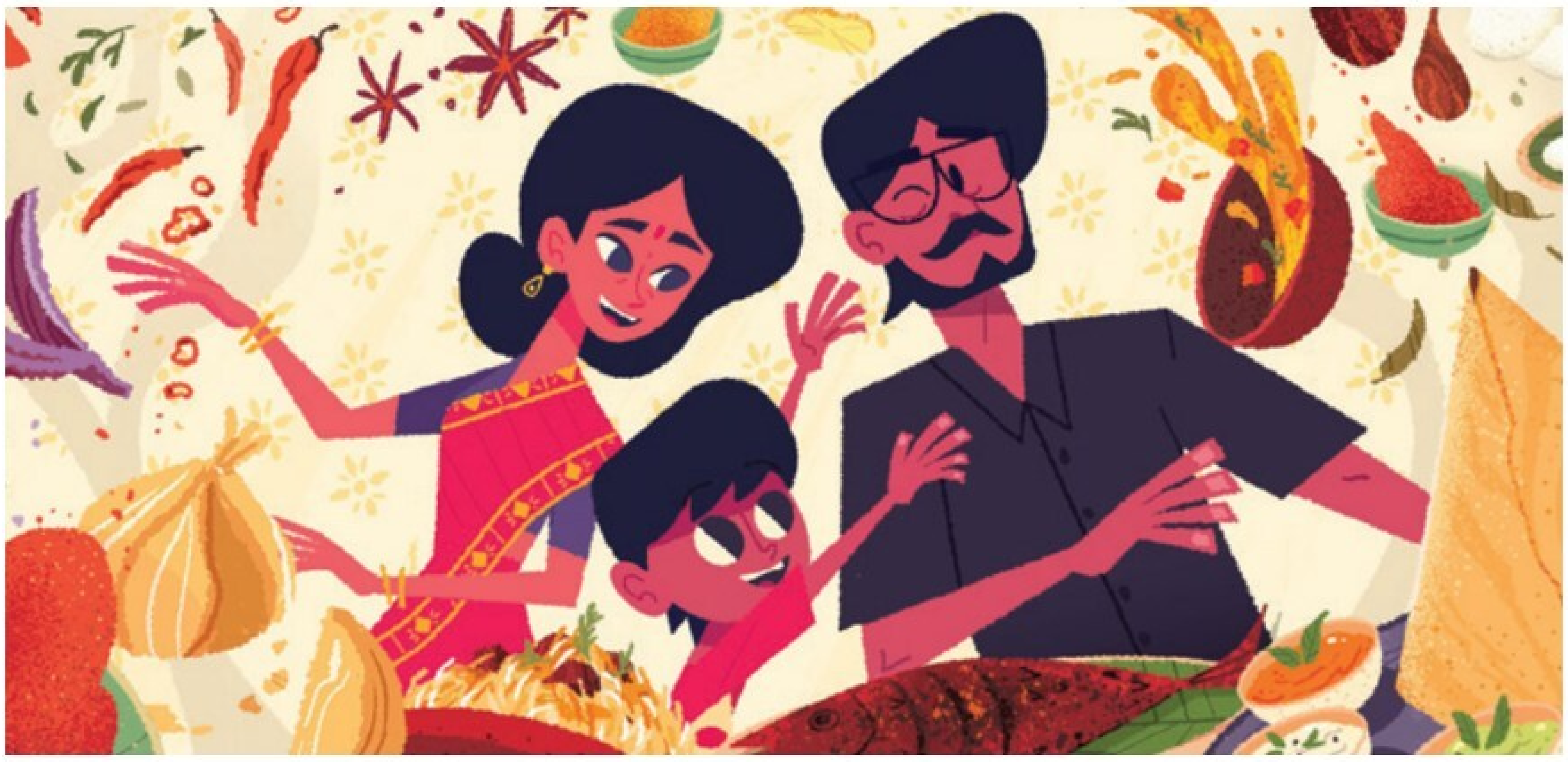
Dredge

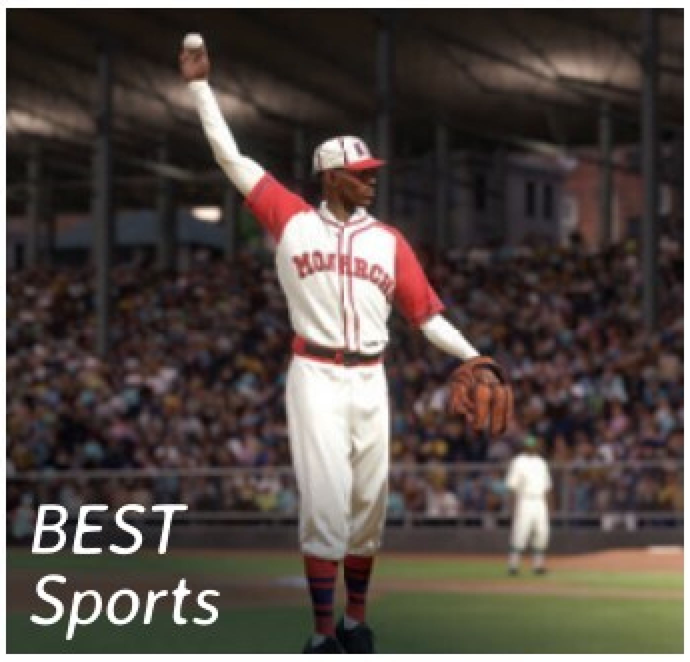
Dredge manages to turn fishing into an unsettling affair by incorporating Lovecraftian-style horror that taps into the fear of open water. The satisfying loop of sailing the large ocean to catch a huge variety of fish, selling them to stores, and purchasing ship upgrades had us on board – the supernatural elements and intriguing story kept us hooked. Dredge's creative, sometimes devious scares instilled a healthy fear of sailing at night, whether it's monsters disguised as boats, giant crabs mimicking wreckage, or a deep sea Kraken. – ***Marcus Stewart***

EDITOR PICK

Venba

On the surface, Venba is a simple cooking game. Follow a series of puzzle-like recipes to bring a variety of mouth-watering dishes to life. But in reality, the cooking is merely a vehicle for a deeply affecting story of an Indian mother immigrating to Canada and struggling to raise a son conflicted with embracing his heritage while trying to assimilate into his adopted home. For children of immigrant parents, Venba speaks to the relatable identity crisis of wanting to be "normal" by shunning what makes you unique while shining an entertaining spotlight on Tamil culture and cuisine. – ***Marcus Stewart***

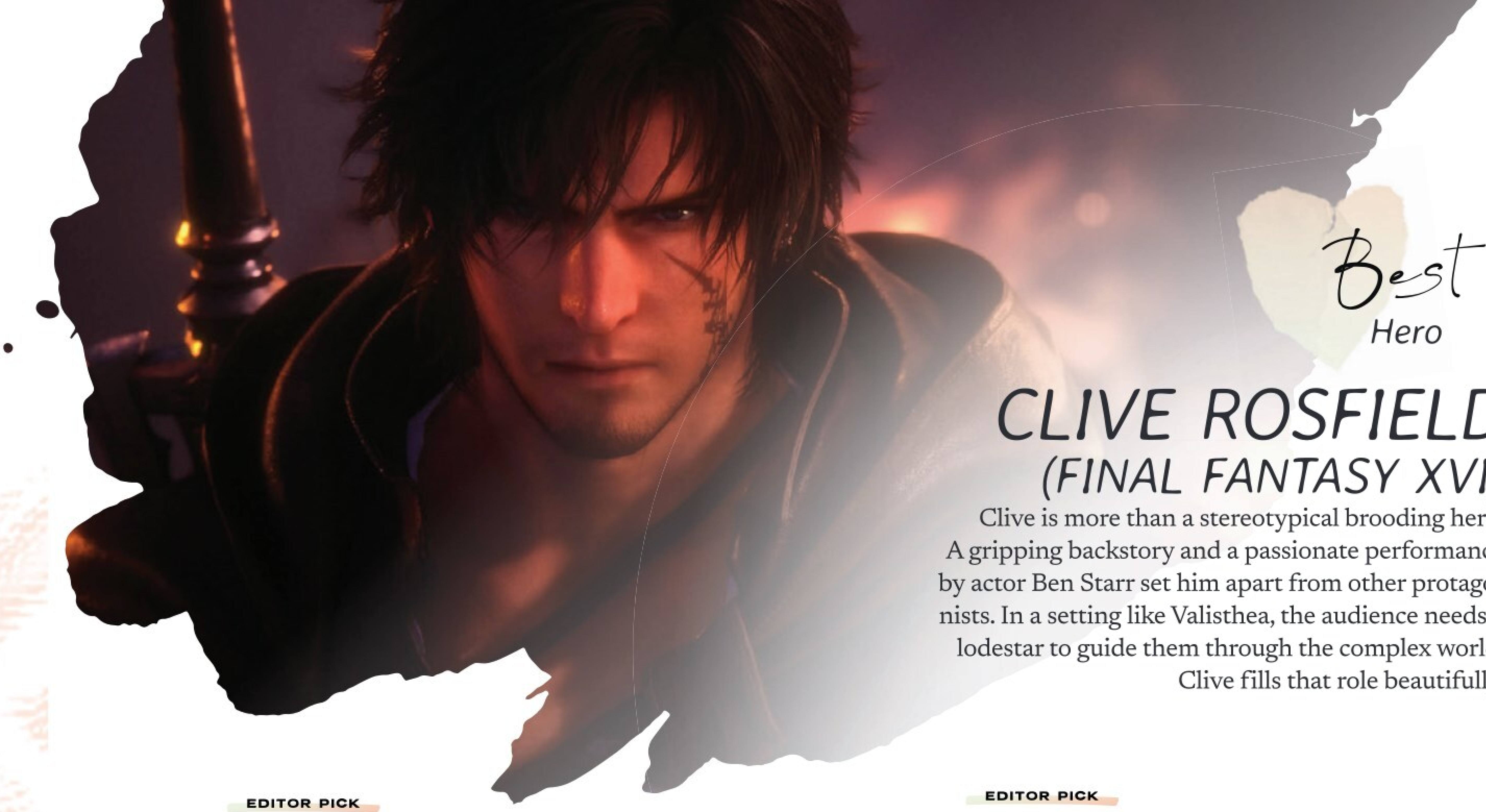




BEST
Sports

MLB THE SHOW 23

The MLB The Show series has long been one of the premier sports franchises, but 2023's entry gave us the series' best showing in a long time. Smooth gameplay is bolstered by a rich suite of modes, including a stellar historical option focused on the players of The Negro Leagues.



Best
Hero

CLIVE ROSFIELD
(FINAL FANTASY XVI)

Clive is more than a stereotypical brooding hero. A gripping backstory and a passionate performance by actor Ben Starr set him apart from other protagonists. In a setting like Valisthea, the audience needs a lodestar to guide them through the complex world. Clive fills that role beautifully.

EDITOR PICK

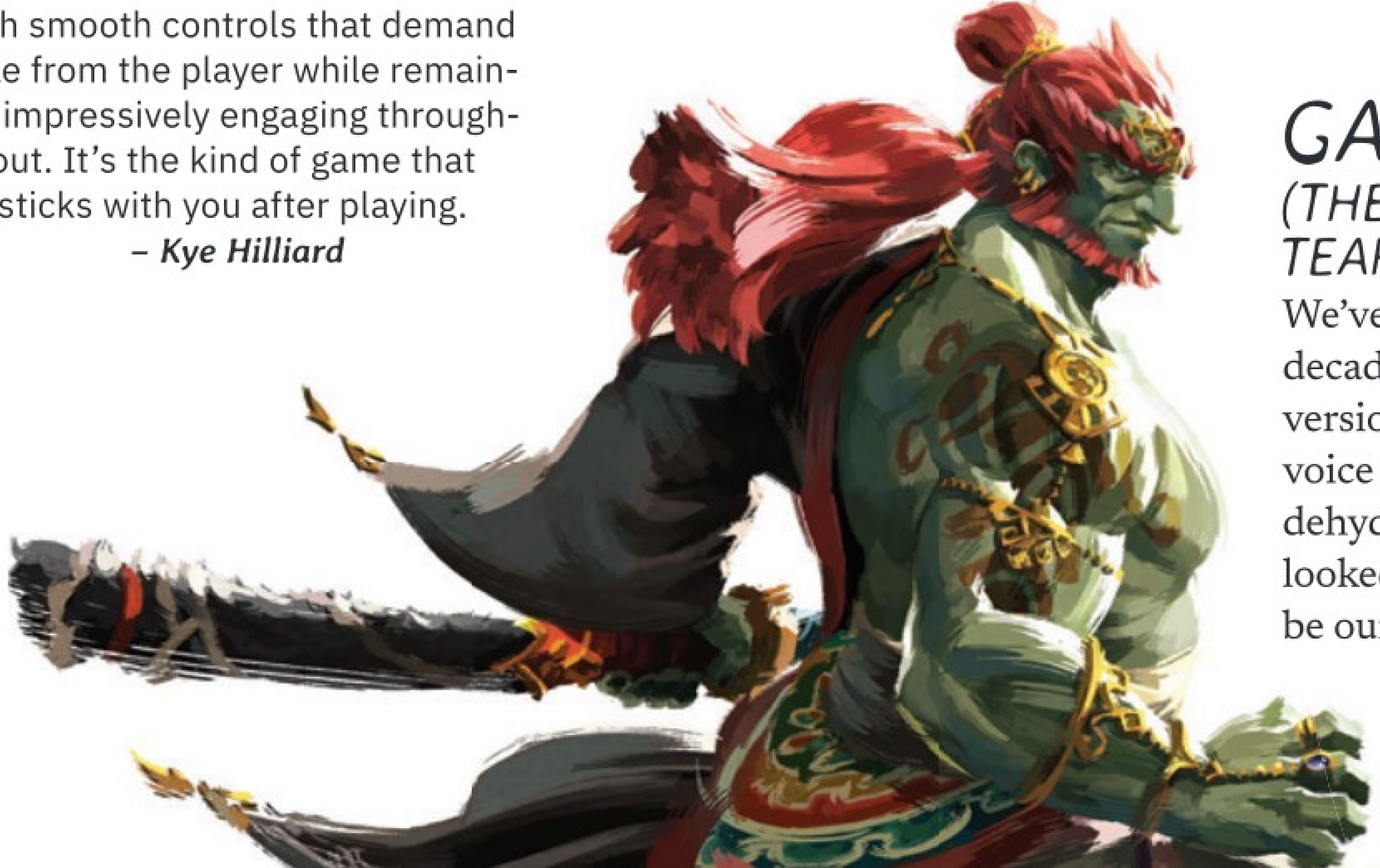
Cocoon

Cocoon is a difficult game to explain, but let's go with this: it's about jumping between worlds on an alien planet. Immaculate puzzle design and entrancing, abstract visuals push you to see what's next, all without ever really understanding what you're looking at. Cocoon also plays like a dream with smooth controls that demand little from the player while remaining impressively engaging throughout. It's the kind of game that sticks with you after playing.
– ***Kye Hilliard***

EDITOR PICK

Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora

Ubisoft leverages a familiar open-world formula for its take on James Cameron's blockbuster movie franchise but finds innovation and magic by crafting an incredibly deep and nuanced world of alien animals, plants, and locales. Whether jumping and climbing through the jungles or flying to floating mountains on your bonded Ikran mount, this immersive adventure is an ambitious and thoughtfully crafted vision of Pandora. As someone who loved the visual vibrancy and creativity of the films, I fell right into the adventure. – ***Matt Miller***



Best
Villain

GANONDORF
(THE LEGEND OF ZELDA: TEARS OF THE KINGDOM)

We've been fighting permutations of Ganon for decades at this point, but Tears of the Kingdom's version stands out among his peers. He had a voice for the first time, and with his immortal, dehydrated form, we don't know that he's ever looked scarier. The final confrontation may also be our favorite Ganondorf fight ever.

EDITOR PICK

Starfield

After years of anticipation, Bethesda's first new game universe in decades finally took players into the depths of outer space. Starfield is a genuinely massive game, filled with a wealth of planets to explore, dozens of divergent side missions, and an intriguing core story about the humbling breadth of the universe. Even when some elements of this sci-fi adventure left me cold, there was no denying the impressive scope and ambition Bethesda put together, which had me ready to jump back into my ship for one adventure after the next. – ***Matt Miller***

BEST
Simulation Game

TERRA NIL

While most games in Terra Nil's genre task you with building a sprawling metropolis, Terra Nil asks you to help nature reclaim what humanity has destroyed. Pushing the planet in the right direction is immensely rewarding, and the various challenges offer plenty of reasons to return for more.

EDITOR PICK

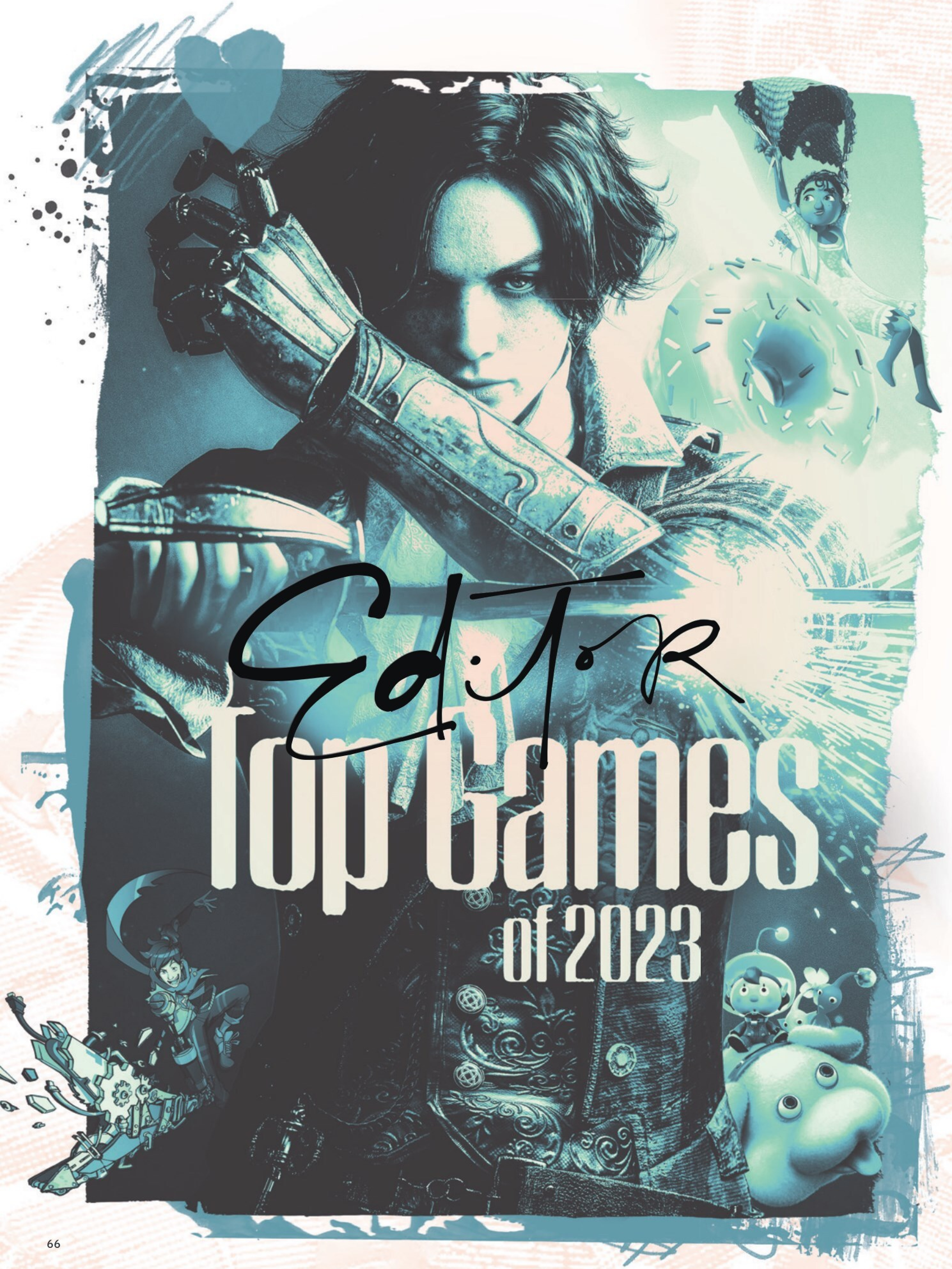
Theatrhythm Final Bar Line

Since its inception in 2012, Square Enix's Theatrhythm series has served as both a great and unique rhythm game and an excellent celebration of Final Fantasy's prolific scores and soundtracks. The latest entry, Final Bar Line, is the best celebration yet. With over 385 tracks from the Final Fantasy franchise, and now, thanks to DLC, even more from series like Nier, The World Ends With You, and classics like Chrono Trigger, it is the pinnacle of the Theatrhythm games. I've returned countless times since its February release and see that continuing well into 2024.
– ***Wesley LeBlanc***

Best
Racing Game

FORZA MOTORSPORT

The Forza Motorsport series has been trading paint with Sony's Gran Turismo franchise in a fight for the pole position of sim-racing franchises for decades. Thanks to its fantastic physics, stunning visuals, and a solid evolution of its Drivatar system, Forza pulled into the lead with this latest entry. ■



EdiToR

Top Games of 2023

MATT MILLER

- **01** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **02** Baldur's Gate 3
- **03** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **04** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- **05** Super Mario Bros. Wonder
- **06** Final Fantasy XVI
- **07** Dave the Diver
- **08** Jusant
- **09** Destiny 2: Lightfall
- **10** Tchia

KYLE HILLIARD

- **01** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **02** Resident Evil 4
- **03** Sea of Stars
- **04** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **05** Pikmin 4
- **06** Dead Space
- **07** Tchia
- **08** Wo Long: Fallen Dynasty
- **09** Cocoon
- **10** Jusant

BRIAN SHEA

- **01** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **02** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **03** Alan Wake 2
- **04** Super Mario Bros. Wonder
- **05** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- **06** Baldur's Gate 3
- **07** Street Fighter 6
- **08** Dave the Diver
- **09** Mortal Kombat 1
- **10** Sonic Superstars

BLAKE HESTER

- **01** Alan Wake 2
- **02** Resident Evil 4
- **03** Jusant
- **04** Humanity
- **05** Nour: Play With Your Food
- **06** VR Skater
- **07** Hi-Fi Rush
- **08** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **09** Armored Core 6: Fires of Rubicon
- **10** Fortnite

MARCUS STEWART

- **01** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **02** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **03** Resident Evil 4
- **04** Baldur's Gate 3
- **05** Jusant
- **06** Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon
- **07** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- **08** Sea of Stars
- **09** Hi-Fi Rush
- **10** Street Fighter 6

WESLEY LeBLANC

- **01** Alan Wake 2
- **02** Lies of P
- **03** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **04** Final Fantasy XVI
- **05** Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty
- **06** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **07** Sea of Stars
- **08** Resident Evil 4
- **09** Fire Emblem Engage
- **10** Fortnite

CHARLES HARTE

- **01** Baldur's Gate 3
- **02** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **03** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- **04** Marvel's Spider-Man 2
- **05** Super Mario Bros. Wonder
- **06** Lies of P
- **07** Fire Emblem Engage
- **08** Chants of Sennaar
- **09** Hi-Fi Rush
- **10** Ghost Trick: Phantom Detective

ALEX VAN AKEN

- **01** Baldur's Gate 3
- **02** The Legend of Zelda: Tears of the Kingdom
- **03** Star Wars Jedi: Survivor
- **04** Friends Vs. Friends
- **05** Alan Wake 2
- **06** Jusant
- **07** The Finals
- **08** Fortnite
- **09** Coral Island
- **10** Final Fantasy XVI

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BOARDWALK
HOTEL DIXON
CH33TAH

GRAND THEFT AUTO VI

Bonnie and Clyde go to Florida

Developer-publisher Rockstar Games has sold more than 370 million units of its Grand Theft Auto series. Grand Theft Auto V, initially released in 2013, accounts for over half of those sales. That singular game, which Rockstar ported to PlayStation 4, Xbox One, and PC in 2014 before bringing it to the latest generation of consoles last year, reached $1 billion in retail sales faster than any entertainment release in history and, in both dollar sales and units sold, is the best-selling game of the 2010-20 decade in the U.S. In short, Grand Theft Auto is not just a video game juggernaut – it is *the* video game juggernaut and one of the biggest entertainment properties in the world.

It's no wonder Rockstar has continued to milk Grand Theft Auto Online, a free packaged-in multiplayer component of GTA V, for the past decade. But that decade of constant cash flow and positive reception from fans has also given the teams behind this massive franchise the time to develop the next iteration. Now that the official reveal has come and gone, we know it is, unsurprisingly, titled Grand Theft Auto VI.

Rockstar released what would soon become the most-liked gaming tweet of all time at the top of December to state when it would release the first trailer for the next Grand Theft Auto game. That reveal was supposed to happen on Tuesday, December 5, but after leaking online the night before, Rockstar acted fast, taking down the poor-quality leaked trailer and copyright striking the cryptocurrency spam account that posted it before quickly posting the official 4K version of the reveal online. Less than 16 hours later, the trailer amassed a colossal 67 million views on YouTube, taking over discussion everywhere online, too. As of writing, it has more than 108 million total views.

The team could have easily released a 15-second trailer with a black screen, the GTA VI logo, and the 2025 release year. Instead, it cut together a minute-and-a-half of Florida-inspired highlights, like the Miami facsimile Vice City (although we're no longer in the '80s this time), a swampy Everglades, giant alligators, a Florida man, and more.

Perhaps most exciting, though, is the reveal of Lucia, the first female protagonist of the franchise (yes, we know you could play as one of four women in the very first GTA, but that might as well be of a different series at this point) and her unnamed partner-in-crime. While not officially named, past leaks point to them being named Jason and playable as the game's second protagonist. The trailer shows a Bonnie and Clyde-type story with Lucia and this male protagonist, with snippets of crime and romance shedding light on their relationship.

"The only way we're going to get through this is by sticking together, being a team," Lucia asks her partner. "Trust?"

Given how well Rockstar's writing efforts have been in games past, especially 2018's Red Dead Redemption II, I'm excited to see what this narrative pulls off, both as an action crime drama and a story of love.

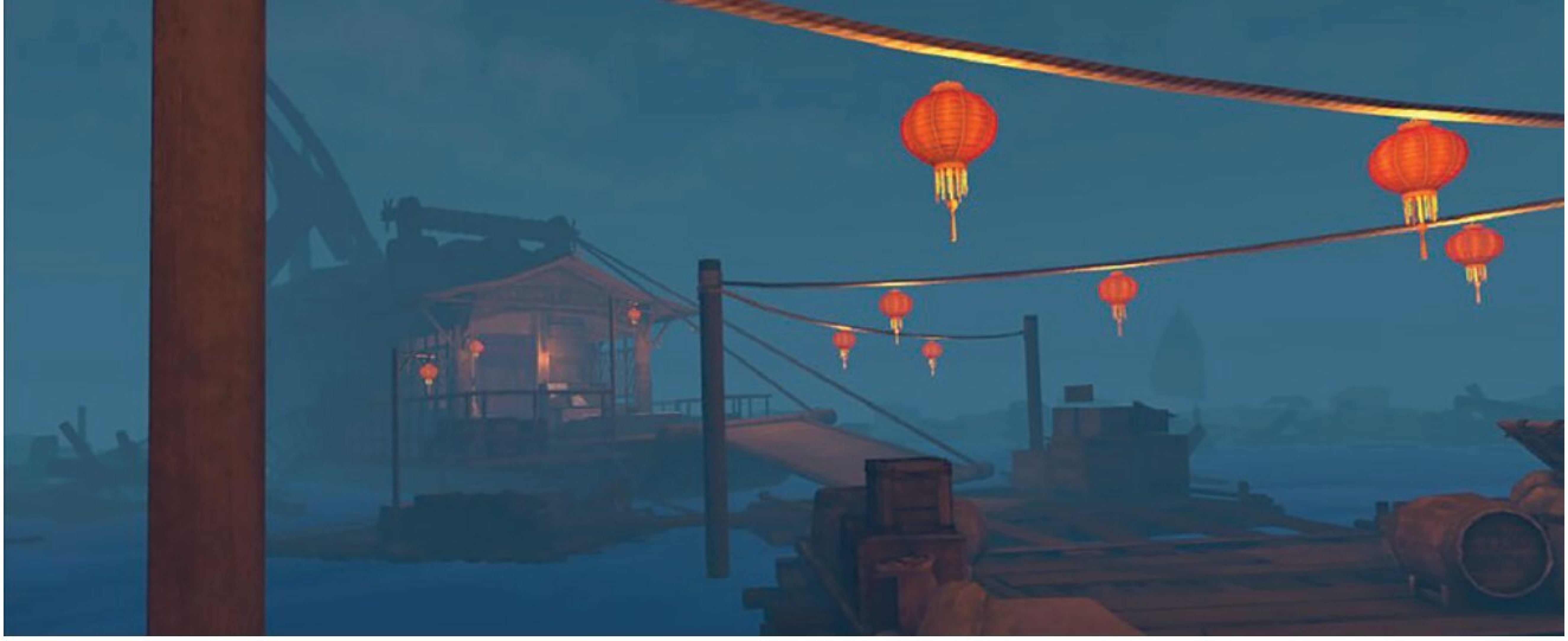
The trailer is also stunning, with the best visuals from a Rockstar game yet and some of the best I've ever seen in a game. Character models, both of the protagonists and the random citizens of Leonida, where Vice City and the other Florida-inspired haunts are in GTA VI, are especially impressive – they just look so real, both in Floridian personality (I would know as a Jacksonville resident) and animation.

Just like my everyday life in Florida, the trailer features alligators crawling into convenience stores, people twerking on vehicles driving down the road, an old guy watering his front yard in the nude, old ladies threatening people with hammers, cops and robbers, yachts I can't afford, and more. In the most Rockstar way, the team is already doing well at taking a microcosm of the broader United States and jam-packing it with satire highlighting how absurd this country can be. Given the team's track record, I can't wait.

The trailer ends with the reveal that GTA VI will be released in 2025, an admittedly longer wait than I expected, bringing the time between it and its predecessor, GTA V, to a whopping 12 years. Parent company Take-Two Interactive Software says it's coming to just PlayStation 5 and Xbox Series X/S, leaving out PC on day one (same as GTA V and Red Dead II when they were released). Nonetheless, GTA VI will likely sell astronomically even with just two release day platforms. We'll know for sure in two years. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

For more, head to Game Informer*'s YouTube channel to watch editors and Florida residents Marcus Stewart and Wesley LeBlanc react to the trailer*

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Rockstar Games **DEVELOPER** Rockstar Games **RELEASE** 2025

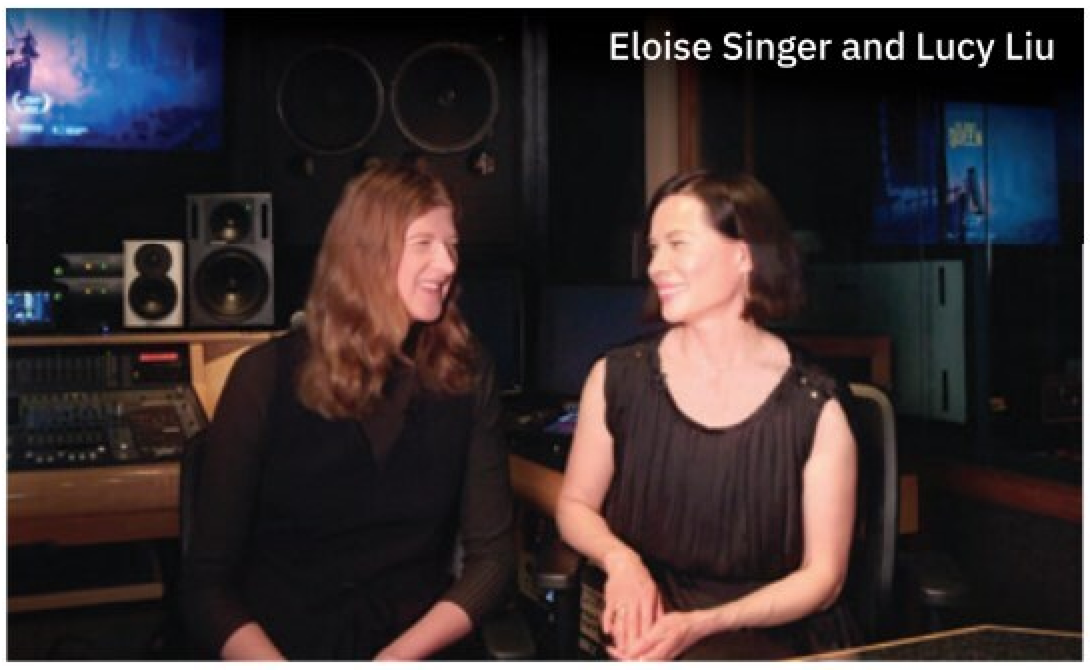


THE PIRATE QUEEN: A FORGOTTEN LEGEND

Shedding light from a new perspective

When you think of pirates, historical mainstays like Blackbeard might come to mind alongside the fictional Jack Sparrow. An important but often forgotten name, however, is Cheng Shih. Not only is Cheng Shih one of history's most successful pirates, but she's also the woman who took over late husband Zheng Yi Sao's pirate armada after his death, putting her in indirect control of 40,000-plus pirates for a nearly decade-long stint in Chinese waters in the early 19th Century. While Shih's story can be found on pages of books and elsewhere, Singer Studios aims to bring her story to life in VR.

Taking place across a single night – the night Shih came to power – The Pirate Queen: A Forgotten Legend puts players in the boots of Shih in PC VR devices and Meta Quest 2 next year. During a private game demo, I got a taste of this VR experience, which goes the escape room-esque route of VR gaming rather than the guns-blazing, set piece-heavy one. Its quiet and methodical approach to gameplay is enticing, even without being in a headset to experience it myself. I'm especially interested in the team's focus on Shih's story and setting this VR game to a single night in her life. I'm told not to expect massive, pirate-filled battles but instead the emotional intensity Shih might have experienced that night.



Eloise Singer and Lucy Liu

"We come from film, so VR is a nice stepping stone for us," Singer Studios CEO and creative director Eloise Singer tells me. "Each level has an escape room aspect; we wanted to lean away from being a shooter or combat game, challenging you to be as smart as she was, using her intellect to outsmart everyone."

Lead artist Will Brosch describes The Pirate Queen as a brains-over-brawns experience, and that's clear from the 20-minute demo I watch. There aren't swords clashing and gunpowder explosives lighting the horizon – Brosch says there isn't any hand-to-hand combat in the game, though he does tease the use of cannons – but instead, bite-sized puzzles to solve. One example is a door with a lock in the captain's cabin aboard the ship that used to be Sao's. Various symbols mark the lock, and after throwing some rocks at some pottery on top of a cabinet, the player discovers more symbols on the wall. They line the symbols on the lock with those on the wall to open it and move through the door.

"There's a lot of cognitive puzzle stuff," Brosch explains. "The script is quite narrative, linking back to our film background, and it's about finding gameplay that fits within the script."

This highlights Singer Studio's story-first approach to The Pirate Queen, which is vital because Shih's story is an important one to tell in a landscape drenched with male-driven piracy, be it games, movies, TV shows, or books. Singer tells me that approach helped the team land actress Lucy Liu (*Kill Bill: Volume 1*, *Charlie's Angels*) as an executive producer and the voice of the titular pirate queen.

I enjoy the demo I'm shown of The Pirate Queen and speaking to the team behind it just as much. Singer, Brosch, and the others I talk to are passionate about Shih's story and bringing it to life respectably and excitingly through VR. It's tough to say just how enjoyable it is to experience without going hands-on, but what I've seen and heard excites me to do so when it launches next year. **BY WESLEY LEBLANC**

PLATFORM Rift • Meta Quest 2 • Vive **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Singer Studios
DEVELOPER Singer Studios **RELEASE** 2024

APOLLO JUSTICE: ACE ATTORNEY TRILOGY

Improved, beyond a reasonable doubt

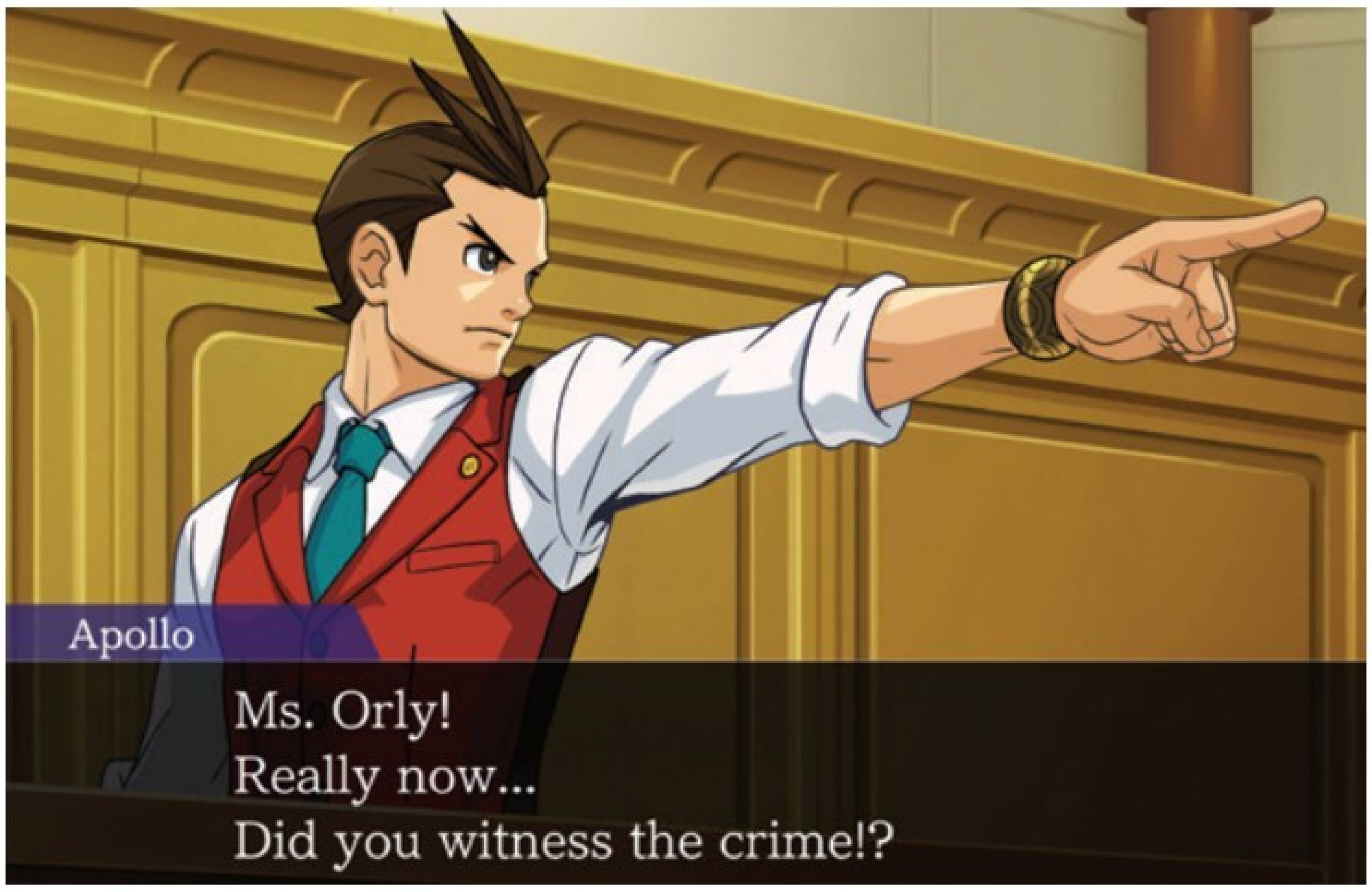
There's never been a better time to get into Ace Attorney. Developer-publisher Capcom has spent the last few years remastering and re-releasing every game in the series, and with the Apollo Justice trilogy, you can now play every mainline game on modern consoles. And even though the three games in this collection are unchanged story-wise, after going hands-on, we can comfortably say that they've never felt better.

The collection contains three games: Apollo Justice: Ace Attorney, Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Dual Destinies, and Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney – Spirit of Justice. The games don't really feel like a cohesive trilogy the way the first three in the series do, but you still need to play them in order. The first game takes place seven years after the events of Ace Attorney 3 and introduces Apollo Justice, a young new attorney who's guided by Phoenix Wright and his daughter, Trucy. The latter two games introduce Athena Cykes (another new attorney with the ability to sense emotions) as a playable character.

The graphics are much cleaner than the previous entries, especially in Apollo's first game, since it was released in 2007 on the DS. While it loses some of its charm by ditching the pixel art style, it's much easier on the eyes on a big screen. Meanwhile, the 3DS entries are far improved from their earlier versions, as if this was the quality the designers strove for in the first place.

The trilogy also comes with a new museum mode. In addition to an Orchestra Hall that allows you to hear songs on demand and a gallery of concept art, there's an animation studio feature that allows you to cycle through every character animation the game has. They're nice touches for those who have a deeper appreciation for the series. You'll be able to check it out for yourself when the game launches in January. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

PLATFORM PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Adventure **PUBLISHER** Capcom
DEVELOPER Capcom **RELEASE** January 25



Apollo

Ms. Orly!
Really now...
Did you witness the crime!?

WILD CARD FOOTBALL
OUT NOW
EVERYONE
E
ESRB
SABER
Wild Card Football ©2023. Published by Saber Interactive Inc. Developed by Saber Interactive Inc. All rights reserved. Officially Licensed Partner of the NFLPA © 2023. Colin Kaepernick, Kaepernick are trademarks of Inked Flash, Inc. All rights reserved. All player likenesses used under license.

TEKKEN 8

Return of The King of the Iron Fist

Following the events of Tekken 7, the stage for Tekken 8's story is set up to be perhaps the most over-the-top yet. In the six months since the defeat of Heihachi Mishima, his son, Kazuya Mishima, has installed a reign of terror over the planet using his devil powers. And while the setup is, quite frankly, a lot to take in, if the first four chapters I played are any indication, the level of spectacle and bombast reaches new levels in Tekken 8's Story Mode.

The first chapter opens with Lars Alexandersson on a high-tech plane. He mentions the mission is to take down "evil incarnate," as he indicates the very man he hunted in previous titles, Jin Kazama, might be their only hope. The scene flashes to Jin speeding through busy city streets on a motorcycle. To my surprise, he rides his motorcycle up the side of a building and, in a move that would make the combined *Fast & Furious* and Marvel casts blush, grabs the motorcycle with his hands and throws it at the nearby helicopter. Jin lands on the ground and watches the helicopter's fiery crash. From the flames, his target emerges – Kazuya.

After a heated exchange, Story Mode's first fight breaks out. Playing as Jin, I take it to Kazuya. Each time I've played Tekken 8 so far, I've marveled at how the themes of aggression shine through in the most effective strategies. I sprint at Kazuya, launching him into the air and juggling him with an air combo before blasting him with a Heat Smash. From there, I use Jin's now-enhanced speed from the Heat Gauge to pummel Kazuya. He gets a few good licks in, but I take him down. In between each round, brief cutscenes set up the next round, giving it a more cinematic feel than a standard fighting game.

In this instance, Kazuya goads Jin's devil form out, giving me a chance to play as Devil Jin. I put his powers to good use, including his powerful Rage Art. Following this second-round victory, Jin takes the action to the next level, as he grabs Kazuya and smashes him through the roof of a skyscraper, bringing the entire building down around them. I couldn't help but chuckle at how far the team is pushing the events of this Story Mode, even in this first chapter. The next three chapters, which feature Kazuya destroying the world's military satellites and installing the King of the Iron Fist tournament to determine the new hierarchy of world powers, show that we might be in for a wild ride with this narrative. At the same time, Jin struggles to regain his powers while not allowing them to consume him. It's silly and ridiculous, and I cannot wait.

On top of Story, I got to play Arcade Quest, a new secondary story mode focusing on a Tekken 8 player as they journey through the arcade scene in hopes of taking home the gold in various tournaments. Its setup and production values are quaint in contrast to the main Story Mode, but I love going around to different arcades and challenging NPCs to Tekken 8 matches, all while learning new techniques via the in-game coach, Max. My Replay + Tips lets you study how you can improve your game through tailor-made pointers, while Super Ghost Battles allow you to play against an A.I. opponent that learns player tendencies in real time.

When you feel like you've studied enough tape, you can take a break and play a little Tekken Ball, which makes its first appearance since the Wii U version of Tekken Tag Tournament 2. This volleyball-style competitive mode lets you smack a ball back and forth, dealing damage with each successful point. It's goofy and far from the most in-depth feature, but it's a lot of fun.

After a strong year for fighting games thanks to releases like Street Fighter 6 and Mortal Kombat 1, Tekken 8 hopes to carry that trend into the early portion of 2024. With 32 fighters available at launch, including some incredible additions like Victor (who will probably be my new main), Reina, and Azucena, I feel better about Tekken 8 each time I get my hands on it. **BY BRIAN SHEA**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1 or 2-Player Fighting (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Bandai Namco Entertainment **DEVELOPER** Bandai Namco Studios, Arika **RELEASE** January 26

THE LAST OF US PART II REMASTERED

Reopening old wounds

The Last of Us Part II remains a technical showpiece more than three years after its launch, but that's not stopping developer Naughty Dog from polishing it up with a PlayStation 5 remaster. On top of improving Ellie and Abby's revenge quests with graphical and technical upgrades, new modes add meat to the package, including a roguelite called No Return.

This remaster boasts a native 4K resolution in Fidelity mode and 1440p upscaled to 4K in Performance mode. Textures, shadows, and animations have also been improved, and it features DualSense haptic feedback and an unlocked framerate for TVs with variable refresh rates.

While the original campaign remains intact, Lost Levels will let players explore early versions of three stages that didn't make it into the original: Sewers, Jackson Party, and Boar Hunt. Another behind-the-scenes feature is the new developer commentary, letting players listen to the creators' insights as they trek through the adventure. For fans of the guitar-playing mechanic, a free play mode lets players go wild on the strings as well as other new instruments. A Speedrun Mode lets competitive players challenge each other's fastest completion times, and Photo Mode receives perks such as dynamic lighting, frame forwards, and gaze direction.

No Return offers the biggest and most surprising addition. This roguelite survival mode lets players choose from 10 playable characters, such as main stars like Ellie, Abby, and Joel, to previously unplayable faces like Tommy, Dina, and Lev, to battle a randomized series of combat encounters. Each character sports unique traits and special perks modeled after their personality and proficiencies displayed in the story. Ellie is well-rounded, while Abby is a brawler who can regain health by hitting melee attacks. Dina excels at crafting, and Lev is stealth-focused, so he's automatically equipped with his powerful and silent bow.

Each level offers different match types. These include Assault, which tasks players to kill every enemy in the arena, or Hunted, in which you must survive never-ending waves of foes until a time limit expires. Levels come with different mods or stipulations, like having an AI partner join you, shrouding the arena in a thick fog, or even turning all enemies invisible. Challenges offer bonus objectives that, upon completion, unlock additional characters, outfits, weapons, mods, levels, and more. Enemies range from human factions such as the WLF or Seraphites to different types of Infected. Reaching the end of your chosen path pits you against a powerful boss, including a giant Bloater or Rattler captain.

Having played No Return at a recent preview, the mode offers a fun and challenging avenue to enjoy the game's exceptional combat without enduring the emotionally taxing narrative. Naughty Dog says it'll take players roughly seven hours to unlock everything in No Return, designing it so that it will always offer new rewards and twists the longer you play.

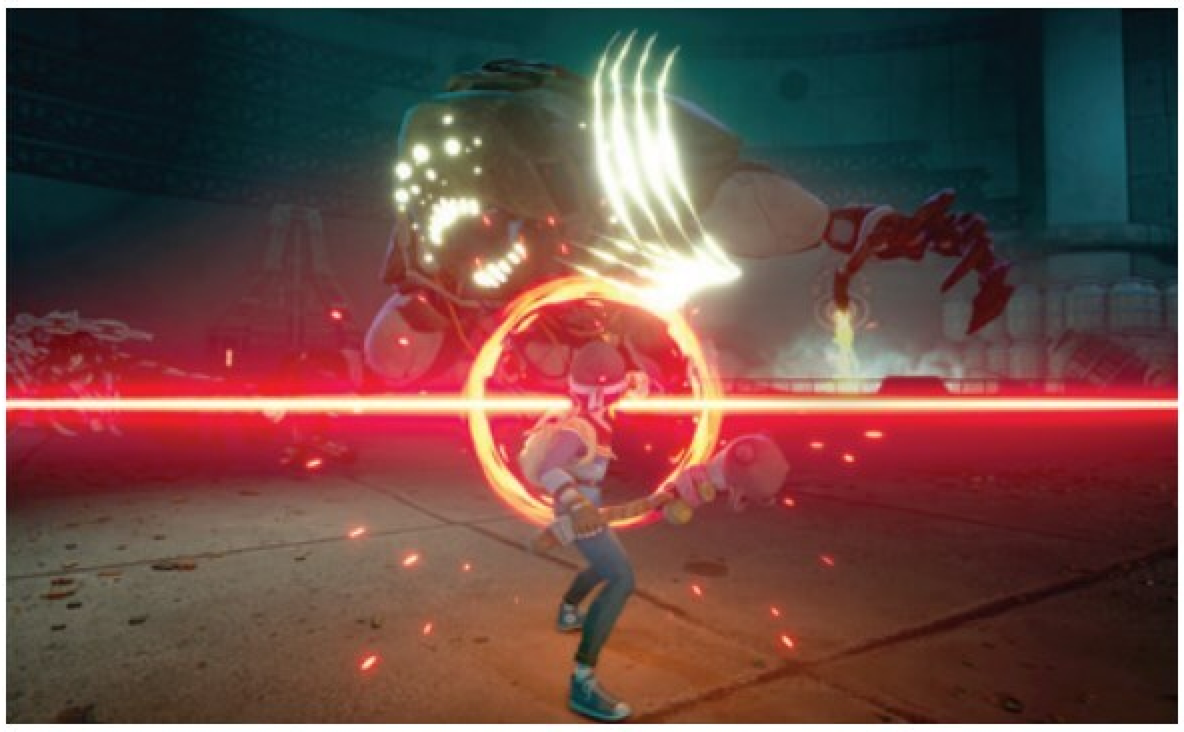
The Last of Us Part II Remastered will be a $10 upgrade for owners of the original game and $49.99 as a standalone package. While some may understandably view it as an unnecessary update, the bonus additions like No Return and the Lost Levels help make the remaster feel more substantial than just a graphics update for existing fans. As for newcomers, the improvements and additions (plus the reduced price) make for quite the bargain. Whether we're emotionally ready to relive the agony and heartbreak The Last of Us Part II throws at players is another question, but at least that tragedy will look even better this time around.

BY MARCUS STEWART

Visit GameInformer.com to read our full hands-on impressions and insights from game director Matthew Gallant

PLATFORM PS5 **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Sony Interactive Entertainment
DEVELOPER Naughty Dog **RELEASE** January 19

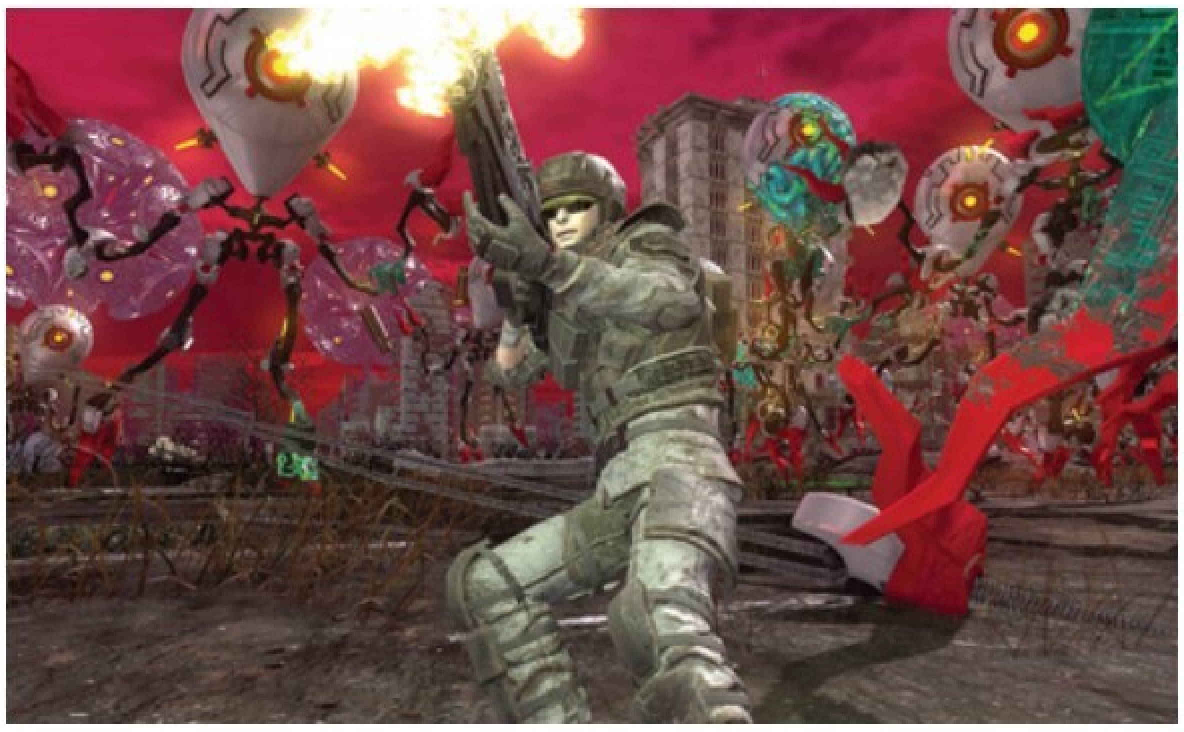
ROBOTS AT MIDNIGHT



In Robots at Midnight, you are Zoe, who must fight her way to survival on a luxury destination planet now overrun by robots. The game has a great visual style and excellent animation, and though we haven't been able to get our hands on the game yet to confirm, there seems to be a little Soulsborne flavor to the action. The developer describes the combat as "strategic" and "skill-based." We're excited to see how Zoe's adventure plays out. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER Finish Line Games **DEVELOPER** Finish Line Games **RELEASE** 2024

EARTH DEFENSE FORCE 6

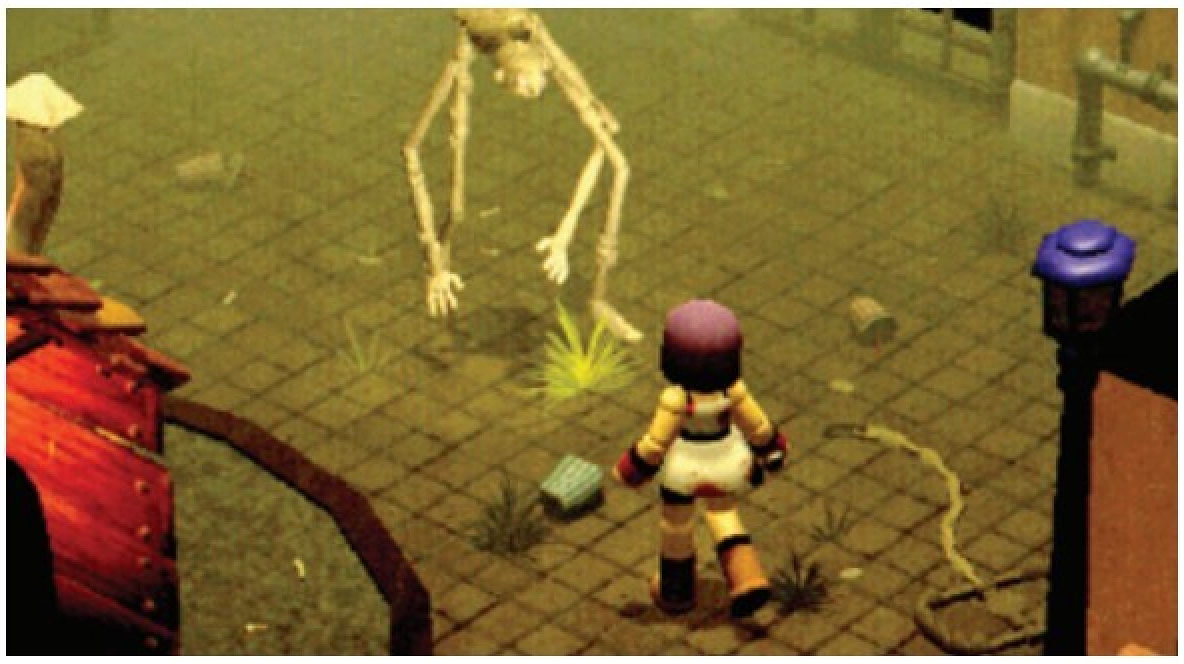


The Earth Defense Force series is the poster child for the video game cult classic. I would be hard-pressed to say it's a good game, but the sci-fi series about shooting gigantic bugs on a ravaged planet Earth has a consistent and enthusiastic group of fans. Earth Defense Force 6 was released in Japan in 2022, but it's finally making its way to North America next year. Get ready to shoot a whole lot more bugs. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (Multiplayer TBD)
PUBLISHER D3 Publisher **DEVELOPER** Sandlot **RELEASE** Spring 2024

CROW COUNTRY

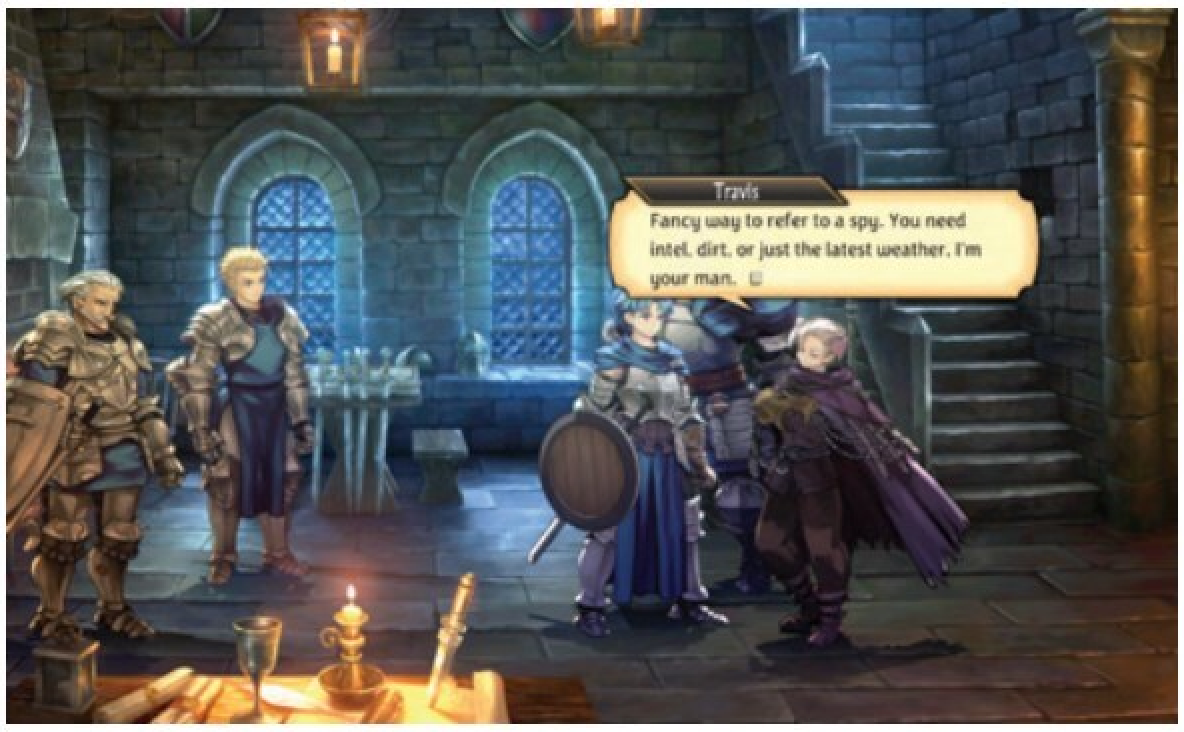
The creator of Snipperclips, a family-friendly puzzle game, is heading in a more Silent Hill direction for its next game. Crow Country features a throwback style reminiscent of PlayStation's earliest days before developers figured out how to model something approximating a human. Taking the motif a step further, the game takes place in 1990 in an abandoned amusement park called, well, Crow Country. A demo showcases a spooky, foreboding style. We can't wait to explore the park fully. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



PLATFORM PS4 • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Survival Horror **PUBLISHER** SFB Games
DEVELOPER SFB Games **RELEASE** 2024

UNICORN OVERLORD

As a developer, Vanillaware has established a specific, recognizable style with its games – even if it's completely inconsistent with genre. Its previous titles like Dragon's Crown, 13 Sentinels: Aegis Rim, and Odin Sphere play in action, strategy, and visual novel. Its latest pulls inspiration from Fire Emblem to create an original, medieval tactical strategy game featuring 60 characters all visualized in Vanillaware's beautiful art direction. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**



Fancy way to refer to a spy. You need intel, dirt, or just the latest weather. I'm your man.

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Strategy
PUBLISHER Atlus **DEVELOPER** Vanillaware **RELEASE** March 8

THE ALTERS

Jan is an astronaut stranded on an alien planet. To survive, he creates alternate versions of himself, each with various strengths and weaknesses. One Jan is focused on science, for example, while another spends his time outside of the ship looking for resources. In theory, the game will function as a survival simulation but also as a psychological thriller about how a group of people survives – when they're all the same person. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation
PUBLISHER 11 Bit Studios **DEVELOPER** 11 Bit Studios **RELEASE** 2024

ALONE IN THE DARK

Four years before the first Resident Evil popularized it, Alone in the Dark pioneered the isometric camera perspective survival horror game. The remake boasts Hollywood talent and a new third-person perspective. Developer Pieces Interactive also showed me some of the newly added mechanics, like bizarre nightmare portals to other locations and malleable difficulty modes that let you approach the game without any puzzle hints. We're hopeful the remake finally gives the series the credit it deserves. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action
PUBLISHER THQ Nordic **DEVELOPER** Pieces Interactive **RELEASE** March 20

INZOI

Heavily inspired by The Sims, Inzoi tasks players with controlling Zois (a.k.a. human beings) at the behest of your boss, an adorable cat (which also appears to be some kind of god). The game is being built in Unreal Engine 5, which makes the early visuals incredibly impressive. As in, I don't know if the final game will actually look this good, kind of impressive. But in the game, you will be able to create characters and control them and the neighborhoods the Zois live in. **BY KYLE HILLIARD** ■

PLATFORM PC **STYLE** 1-Player Simulation (Multiplayer TBA) **PUBLISHER** Krafton **DEVELOPER** Krafton **RELEASE** 2024

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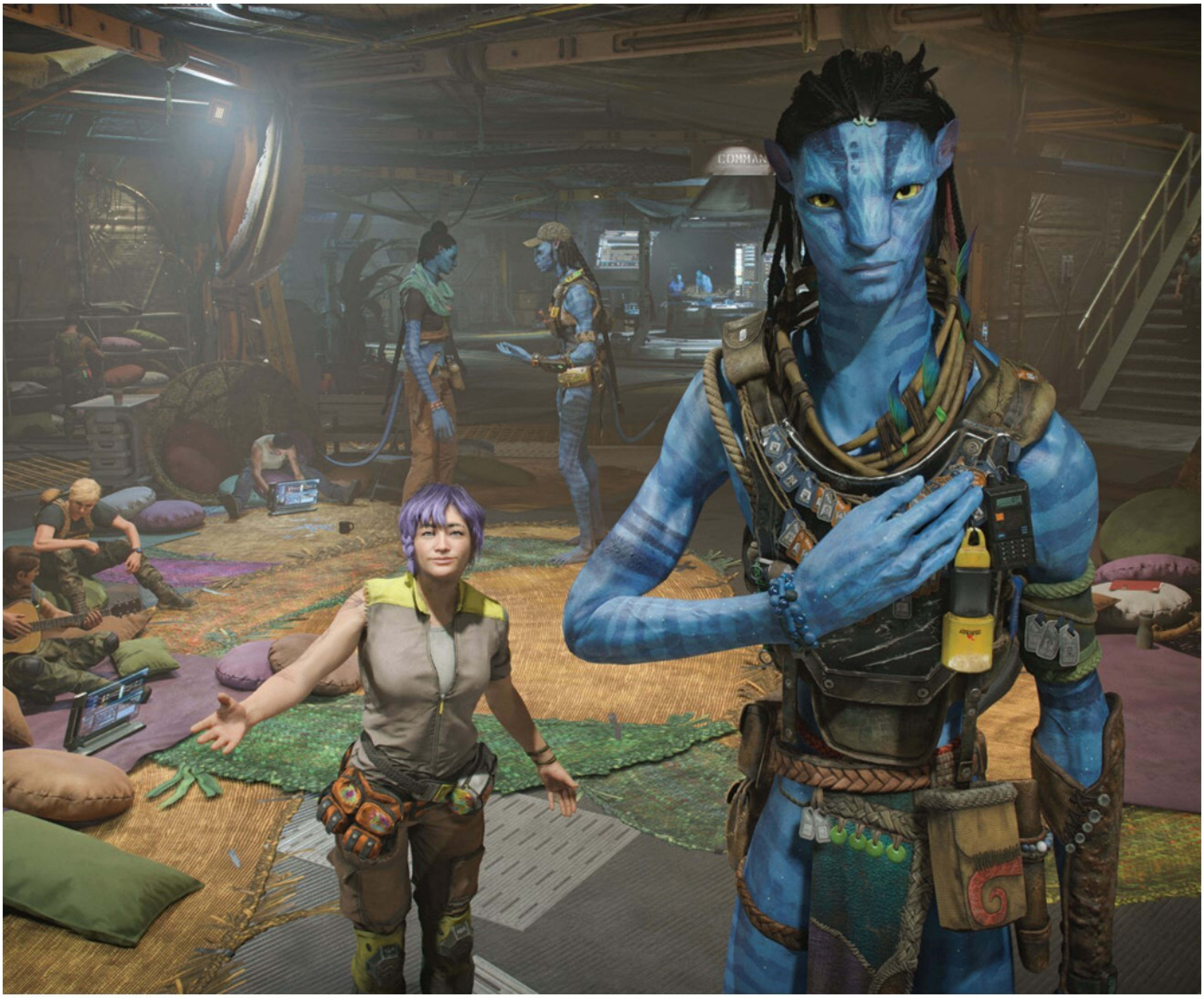


AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Tripping through jungles

The Avatar films are great fun but have never blown me away with original storytelling. Instead, the translation of familiar formulas into a vibrant and visually arresting alien world elevates the films. Avatar: Frontiers of Pandora follows that same tack, featuring first-person exploration and combat borrowing liberally from franchises like Far Cry. But here, an enormous and detailed fantasy world breathes life into the experience, making it both more engaging and sometimes needlessly obtuse – but always with a flair for the source material.

While concurrent with the movies, Frontiers of Pandora tells a separate standalone story about a small group of young Na'vi raised by the villainous and ecologically reckless RDA, and one individual Na'vi's gradual rediscovery of their heritage and connection to nature. The overt environmental themes of the franchise are accentuated by a pointed indictment of child separation and forced re-education among indigenous populations. Developer Massive Entertainment has done a phenomenal job capturing the unique fictional nuances of the Na'vi, adding several fresh wrinkles in the form of new clans and individuals. It's a genuine treat for franchise fans that adds substantially to the lore.

Gameplay is all about running and leaping through dense jungles, plains, and caves, while simultaneously learning the many secrets of Pandora's flora and fauna. The richness of the ecosystems is unmatched in any game I've encountered. I had fun learning the properties and potential of the many strange living things along my path. As I did, new skills and gear enhanced my Na'vi's potential, and I steadily climbed to mastery.

The visual presentation is gorgeous and does justice to the many colors and majestic natural backdrops from the films. Surprisingly, the lush and detailed world was both a joy and hindrance. Sometimes, the onscreen visuals are so overgrown and hard to parse that the game becomes visually confusing. I frequently became lost in the overwhelming stimuli, often missing key objects or clues amid the clutter.

Moving through these richly presented landscapes is great fun, thanks to a generous traversal system of climbing, jumping, and sliding add environmental objects (like plants that bounce you high into the air) that combine to memorable effect and lead to smooth and parkour-like navigation. Enhancing exploration is your dragon-like Ikran mount, allowing you to fly across the vast map easily and quickly.

Along the way, combat using bows and assault rifles adds punch to the action, often accompanied by the chance to take an alternate stealthy route instead. I found both experiences good but not great. Too few tools and abilities allow for stealth approaches, so taking my chances with a fast and direct approach was usually more expeditious. The battles themselves are intense and lethal but rarely elevated above an attempt to peek from behind cover points for pot shots at bad guys. Active close-range melees align more with the expectations established by the movies, but that approach is usually not viable.

Hunting, gathering, crafting, and cooking are central features. There's a lot to experiment with, and creating that great new chest piece or fish dish can sometimes be thrilling. But I eventually found the breadth of options overwhelming. Dozens of different tree barks, mosses, animal hides, and pine cones – many of which can only be optimally gathered at certain times of day or weather conditions – eventually began to swim together in my mind. The game virtually demands that you engage with these mechanics to make meaningful progress, and I frequently found it got in the way of narrative pacing, or it became too frustrating to track down the things I wanted.

In between the action and exploration, Frontiers of Pandora puts a wealth of more minor mechanics and systems in your way. Again, these often hamper the fun as frequently as adding to it. Hacking constant power systems and doors, tedious investigations for forensic clues in a scene, tracking multiple currencies and favor with the clans – there's so much here that it sometimes distracts from what's genuinely fun: the action and discovery of a breathtaking alien landscape.

Even so, I found a lot to love in Frontiers of Pandora, including the welcome addition of two-player online cooperative play, which lets players enjoy the game with a friend. With time, the many interlocking features started to make sense, and I pushed past any frustrations to find a remarkably large and rewarding game. Enter Pandora's vast wilderness with patience and a willingness for a measured march to understanding, and I suspect you'll uncover what I did – a flawed but still praiseworthy addition to this growing science fiction universe. **BY MATT MILLER**

7.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Action (2-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Ubisoft **DEVELOPER** Massive Entertainment **RELEASE** December 7 **RATING** T

PERSONA 5 TACTICA

One more uprising

Persona 5 has become its own sort of mini-franchise within the Persona series. The latest entry, Persona 5 Tactica, delivers an entertaining story, a colorful cast of characters, and fun combat mechanics within the context of a strategy RPG. Longtime Phantom Thieves can look forward to an enjoyable side adventure, but its uneven pacing and low enemy variety hold it back from being a true revolution.

Persona 5 Tactica's story follows the core roster of characters from the original RPG. After finding themselves sucked into an alternate dimension, the group teams up with Erina, the local leader of the Rebel Corps, who wants to liberate citizens from the oppressive rule of the Legionnaires. Toshiro Kusakabe, an amnesiac politician from the real world, also gets swept into the conflict. Their unknown connections to this alternate dimension have enough mystery to keep them interesting throughout the game. As the Phantom Thieves search for a way back home, the antagonists' motivations intertwine with the origins of these newly introduced characters.

The camaraderie between the cast members can be seen through optional conversations that naturally unlock as you progress through the story. Scenes like these are fun interactions that allow characters' personalities to shine. Viewing these talks also gives the party members GP, which are skill points to be allocated to learn new abilities, so there's a useful gameplay incentive, too.

These conversations are bright and fun to listen to, thanks to the game's excellent voice acting and more cartoon art direction. It helps give Tactica a more lighthearted feel to balance out some of its darker themes. The Persona series is also well known for its music, and Tactica's soundtrack doesn't disappoint. The soaring vocals and electrifying guitars will have your head bumping as the Phantom Thieves and Rebel Corps overthrow dictators in battle.

Tactica's combat is more similar to XCOM than Fire Emblem in terms of strategic battles. Your team of three characters can hide behind objects and gain either partial cover, which drastically decreases incoming enemy damage, or full cover, which provides complete immunity. Tactica cleverly utilizes Persona 5's main battle mechanics to fit the strategy genre. Being able to chain multiple 1 More turns and extending my movement range each time replicates the same sense of accomplishment I felt when triggering multiple 1 More turns in the main game.

These mechanics are also important in the game's side quests, as they have restrictions, such as only being allowed to use certain characters or having to complete the battle under a fixed number of turns. I found these to be challenging but also incredibly fun, as they commanded me to think much more strategically than standard story missions.

Another key tactic was triangulating your units around a downed enemy, which activates Triple Threat, Tactica's version of the main game's All-Out-Attacks, where enemies caught in the blast would receive massive damage. Mastering these techniques to come out on top of these challenging side missions is rewarding, and they come with an equally amazing prize.

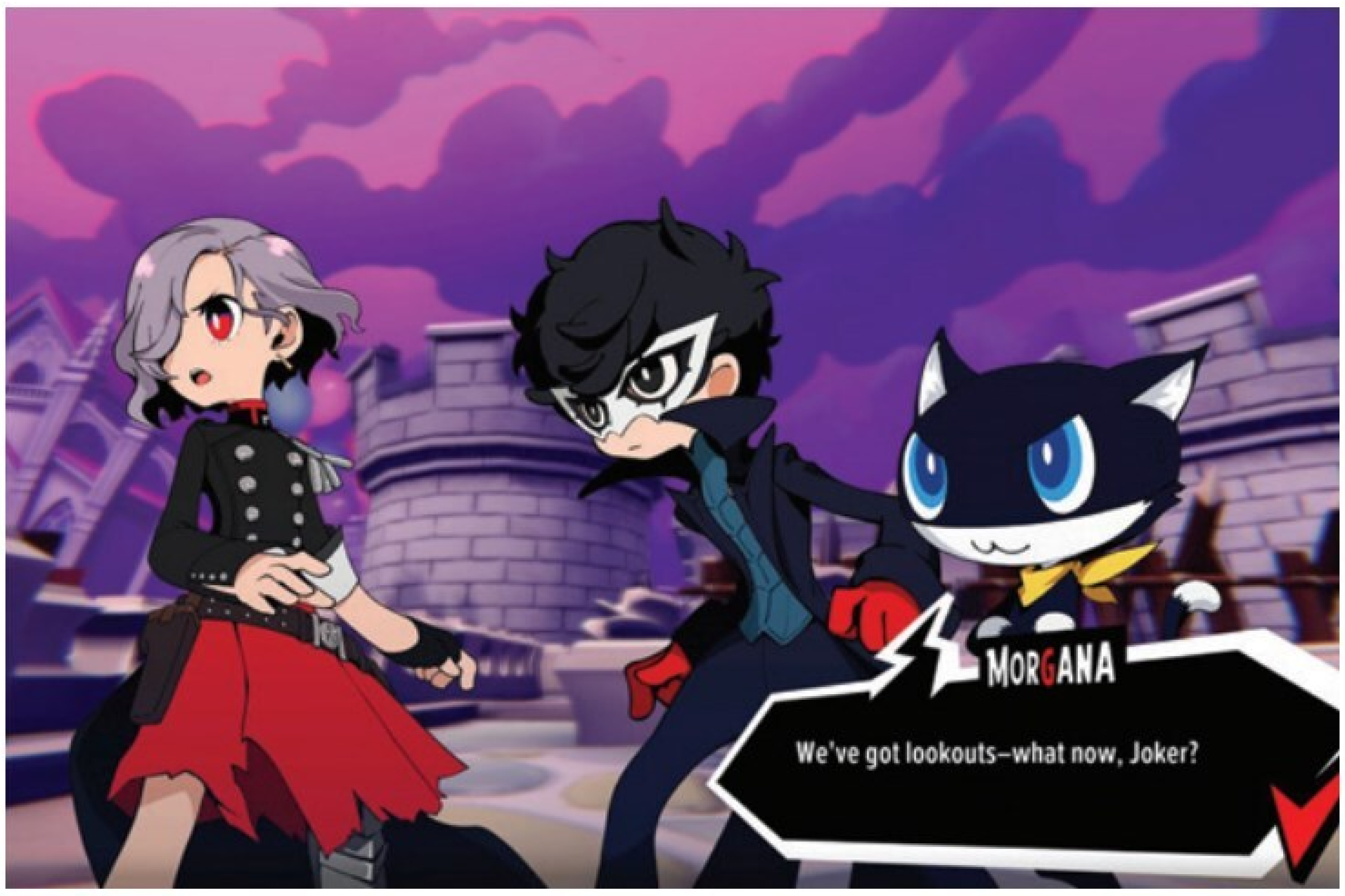
However, the gameplay suffers from uneven pacing when introducing new mechanics. That's especially true during the first 10 hours; you don't receive the powerful follow-up mechanic until the second chapter. I'm confused why these highly effective attacks, which let teammates attack an extra time if you knock an enemy off a higher place, weren't introduced earlier, as that would've kept the early hours fresh.

Enemy variety is also sorely lacking. You often end up facing regular enemies with guns that don't have any unique traits to them. Enemy variety does improve later on, but not quickly enough; it's usually only a single new one per chapter. As a result, it's boring to simply go through the motions when you're repeatedly fighting the same kind of enemies.

Persona 5 Tactica is a fun time for someone looking for a more casual strategy game. The Phantom Thieves are just as charming as ever, and the newly introduced characters mesh well with them. It's not an essential experience for fans in the same way that Persona 5 Strikers was, but those who aren't tired of Persona 5 will find plenty to like with Tactica. **BY GEORGE YANG**

7.25

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Strategy/Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Sega
DEVELOPER Atlus **RELEASE** November 17 **RATING** T



CALL OF DUTY: MODERN WARFARE III

Not-so-special ops

Call of Duty cycles through its lineup of villains on a yearly basis. Sometimes it's Nazis, other times it's Russian nationalists or zombies. But the most dangerous threat is one without a lust for brains or access to weapons of war; it's stagnation. And while many Call of Duty teams often switch up just enough variables to stave off monotony, Call of Duty: Modern Warfare III fully submits to the annual churn.

The campaign embodies this, as it rushes to a conclusion with little care for the details. CoD missions usually follow a predictable yet mostly effective formula of packing together various one-off gameplay mechanics through fluctuating levels of intensity. Modern Warfare III cuts out necessary buildup and most of the variety, leading to basic stages riddled with pacing issues. Many max out at around 15 minutes, which means the usual rollercoaster of ups and downs has been stripped down to only include the descents. The spectacles are also less bombastic, and the abbreviated journey to them only further diminishes their appeal.

Speeding ahead also impedes the storytelling since it barrels through beats at an astonishing clip. How MWII's antagonist is alive and why they're now an ally was haphazardly glossed over in a cutscene from a previous multiplayer season. Vital details like that are just more casualties of its hurried pacing.

While much of the campaign poorly emulates what CoD has already done, the wider Open Combat missions attempt to take that blueprint into new territory. However, the promise of more agency is undone by how shallow these stages are. Exploring these larger levels is not worthwhile as unlocking new guns is often redundant. Upgrades and weapons also don't carry forward between missions.

Objectives can be tackled in different ways, but these options don't go far beyond going loud or sneaking through using rudimentary stealth mechanics. Static mission and map design, limited interactivity, and a lack of meaningful rewards deflate their intended replayability and mean one run is more than enough. Nonlinearity is novel here, but novelty alone is not enough.

MWIII's multiplayer modes more clearly flex COD's signature smooth gunplay and impressive sound design, but are not exempt from the malaise that affects the whole experience. Lower score thresholds and more agile movement mean competitive multiplayer matches have a faster tempo that's still kept in check by the higher time-to-kill. This cadence allows for thrilling firefights, but time spent out of combat is a drag. Earning all the same gear each year is already a tiring process made even more laborious by MWIII's grindy unlock system and busy menus.

Competitive multiplayer, while familiar, highlights at least many of the series' strengths, but the Zombies mode can't even shamble over that low bar. Turning Zombies into an extraction shooter waters down the formula since success now requires multiple matches. The high difficulty means players must repeatedly drop in and acquire better gear before moving forward. The process is slow, tedious, and full of uneventful loot runs and lost progress if killed.

Zombies feels more like a limited-time Warzone event cobbled together from existing ideas and assets and that sentiment permeates throughout MWIII. Each pillar is an inferior patchwork of past ideas from its stunted campaign to its multiplayer that, while the strongest mode, is comprised of systems lifted wholesale from MWII with maps from 2009's MW2. This year's Call of Duty is a threadbare expansion masquerading as a sequel and an embarrassing way to mark the series' 20th anniversary. **BY MICHAEL LERI**

5

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S
PS4 • Xbox One • PC
STYLE 1-Player Shooter (64-Player Online)
PUBLISHER Activision
DEVELOPER Sledgehammer Games
RELEASE November 10 **RATING** M

WARIOWARE: MOVE IT!

Back to form

Ever since its first title 20 years ago, the WarioWare franchise has shapeshifted to take advantage of the capabilities and gimmicks of whatever the current Nintendo platform was. But the first entry on Switch, Get It Together, bucked that trend, putting you in control of the actual cast of characters in platforming-style microgames instead of taking advantage of the Switch's unique traits. WarioWare: Move It aligns more with the traditional WarioWare experience, resulting in a better overall collection.

Move It takes the core tenets of the WarioWare franchise and cranks them up to 11. Players must learn various forms using two individual Joy-Con controllers, then complete rapid-fire microgames – three-to-five-second minigames that rely on your on-the-fly reactions to complete. As you progress through a session, the difficulty of each game and the speed at which they fly at you increases, creating an ever more frantic experience.

I love the diversity of microgames on display. One second, I'm holding my arms out, clanking drinks with people at a party, then a moment later, I'm holding my Joy-Cons like an umbrella to protect a woman from getting soaked in a rainstorm before raising my arms to pick a giant nose. The irreverent humor fans have come to expect is in full effect with Move It, as is the creativity.

The forms allow you to properly position yourself for the upcoming minigame, but some are less developed than others. The "Hand Model" pose is confusing, as you must drop one Joy-Con, then move the other to the now-empty hand to pull off gestures with the other hand; even after completing the story mode, I still struggled to position myself correctly for this form in time thanks to the rapid-fire structure. It's disappointing this form is so complicated to set up since several of my favorite microgames are a part of it. Another one, "Ba-KAW," has you pose like a chicken and features the broadest mix of excellent and frustrating games. However, my least favorite activity is a long-form boss level that involves flipping steaks; I failed multiple times because it doesn't consistently register unless you make overly exaggerated motions timed to when the meat is moving by you on a conveyor belt.

Thankfully, Move It's library is full of oddball games I consistently looked forward to. On multiple occasions, I smirked or outright said, "That was so cool," after experiencing a novel microgame for the first time. However, a few of them don't quite land, as imprecise motion controls lead to frustrating failures, while others aren't descriptive enough for you to reasonably understand what you need to do in the short window you have to do it. Thankfully, if you run out of hearts, you can continue by performing a "Sacred Pose," which is essentially a goofy version of a yoga stance, to earn a continue.

Working through the hundreds of microgames is fun, but as always, it's better with friends. Move It harkens back to one of the better entries in the series, the motion controlled WarioWare: Smooth Moves for Wii. That entry was one of my go-to party games, and I had similar hopes for Move It.

However, due to a couple of complicated forms an accuracy issues with some of the microgames, the core mode of Move It is a harder sell than its Wii predecessor, particularly for casual players. Thankfully, the multiplayer-focused Party Mode lets you perform simpler poses involving one Joy-Con at a slower pace in fun competitions. It's silly and operates on the honor system, but my favorite involves completing microgames with added challenges like sitting on the floor or puffing out your cheeks while you play. Another puts you in the context of a board game, where winning microgames earns you dice rolls. These side modes are great for laughs and are the go-to way to play Move It in a group setting.

Following Get It Together and Game & Wario, Move It is the WarioWare game I've been waiting for over the last 15 years, and it mostly delivers. The motion-controlled madness gives you plenty of fun and novel experiences, even if a few stinkers are in the mix. Regardless of those, Move It's catalog is full of microgames I look forward to revisiting for months to come.

BY BRIAN SHEA

8.25

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1 to 4-Player Party **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER Intelligent Systems **RELEASE** November 3 **RATING** E10+

Story
Wario
Hi-Score 1
10
Ranking
Choo Choo
P1

FIRST THINGS FIRST

WarioWare: Move It lets you play through various microgames using two Joy-Con controllers. If you're like me, you haven't used the Joy-Con wrist straps since you opened your Switch. That means the first thing you will need to do is find the wrist straps for your Joy-Cons, as several forms and microgames require them for specific actions.

SUPER MARIO RPG

Toady nostalgia

The original Super Mario RPG, released for Super Nintendo in 1996, felt like it was meant to be your first RPG. In an era when Final Fantasy tried its best to tell mature stories within the medium's limitations and Dragon Quest demanded hours and hours of your time, Mario's adventure felt much brighter and more manageable. Familiar characters, a lighthearted story, a reasonable length, and timed button-pressing during combat made it stand out against the competition. Revisiting the game more than 25 years later in this new remade shape shows the original formula did not need much tweaking to deliver an engaging and enjoyable journey. Super Mario RPG is not entirely innocent of the sins of video games past, but old fans will relish the chance to see the game in a new light, and I'm confident newcomers will find something to love.

Beyond the fun combat, visuals, and story, the best part of Super Mario RPG is that it is incredibly bizarre. The Nintendo of 1996 was still figuring out the rules of Mario's universe, and as a result, developer Square (not yet Square Enix) was able to create characters and put Mario in positions his parent company would likely never agree to today. The remake, thankfully, maintains all of that weirdness. I didn't find anything salacious or offensive, but there are entire races of characters that we have never seen again in the Mario universe, Shy Guys have full conversations, and some dialogue choices make Mario come off as a jerk. In one scene, a party member has to hold Mario back from punching a child Toad who casually insulted him. I am grateful the game has not been sanitized and is still full of admittedly inconsequential references to other franchises and Nintendo games.

The story is also still quite funny. It never reaches the comedic heights of its spiritual successors like Paper Mario or Mario & Luigi, but I chuckled often. Mario's primary means of communication is jumping to prove he is actually Mario. Every time I pressed the jump button to move the conversation forward, I appreciated the commitment to the bit. Outside of the comedic moments, the actual plot is perfunctory, with few, if any, emotional moments, but I was still eager to see where I was going and who I was going to meet next. Added in-engine character introduction moments and the occasional pre-rendered cutscene help deliver the story in new ways, but I am disappointed the whole game doesn't feature the same visual fidelity.

As it was in the past, combat is a highlight, and the additions for the remake improve the action without detracting from what made it fun to begin with. A new Action Gauge fills as you successfully pull off Action Commands (the timed button-pressing) across battles, and when full, you can pull off powerful and flashy Triple Moves. I went out of my way to try every party combination to see all of them and enjoyed tracking how high I could get my Action Command Chain across battles. One shortcoming, however, is pulling off Action Commands isn't always clear beyond seeing your chain number ticked up. Subsequent games inspired by Mario RPG's combat, like 2023's Sea of Stars, have done a better job at iterating on this system and offering better feedback.

Much of what has changed about Super Mario RPG for the remake beyond the visuals is behind the scenes. The pace is brisker, and my hour count (even after beating the big optional boss) came in lower than the average playtime of the original. The game has been tweaked only slightly to add some new mechanics and make the adventure even more welcoming than it already was. The result is an experience that only shows its age slightly and rewards longtime fans and newcomers alike. **BY KYLE HILLIARD**

8.75

PLATFORM Switch **STYLE** 1-Player Role-Playing **PUBLISHER** Nintendo
DEVELOPER ArtePiazza **RELEASE** November 17 **RATING** E

MUST PLAY

THE TALOS PRINCIPLE II

Profoundly puzzling

The Talos Principle II often left me staring at my screen in awe. Sometimes, from sheer intimidation in the face of a seemingly formidable puzzle. Other times, from my incredulous pride after unraveling said problem. But most of all, the experience regularly gave me pause as I pondered a philosophical idea or argument that challenged my viewpoints on the nature of existence and humanity's place in the cosmos. These moments spurred me to solve the game's 100+ puzzles in search of answers, and I'm largely satisfied with what I discovered.

Set hundreds of years after mankind's extinction, you awaken in a utopian civilization as its 1000th – and final – sentient robot resident. As the sum of all human knowledge, these machines have resigned themselves to living within a single, modest city with strict population, exploration, and consumption limits to avoid repeating humanity's mistakes. However, these beliefs are flipped on their heads when a mysterious entity taking the form of the Greek titan Prometheus beckons the machines towards a mysterious island with a pyramid-like megastructure, towers, and, of course, puzzles. You join a small expedition to discover the island's origin and purpose.

Despite the puzzles being the stars, I enjoyed The Talos Principle II's focus on storytelling and character development, highlighted by choice-driven conversations that do a great job of showcasing the machines' personalities. Decisions influence the city's direction and your standing in ways you won't see for hours, and while I found the outcomes to be adequately satisfying, some optional threads, such as choosing whether or not to join an Illuminati-style secret group, don't always lead to an impactful payoff. Regardless, The Talos Principle II presents fascinating philosophical concepts on the morality and responsibility of being an intelligent entity in a chaotic universe that had me reconsidering my beliefs in enriching and enlightening ways, even if I didn't always agree.

Like the first game, placing crystal refractors to direct light beams around obstacles to the correct lock(s) to open the exit is the core puzzle-solving experience. New mechanics add exciting and creative layers while eliminating the annoying death-dealing hazards, such as bombs and turrets, from the last game. New tools include a device that creates portals on certain surfaces, an anti-gravity machine that lets players (and objects) stand on walls and ceilings, and a refractor that inverts light colors, among others. Each tool is a treat to work with alone, but the game soars highest when challenging you to use several in concert.

Puzzle-solving is still a tricky exercise of placing objects in the correct spots or sequence, a process thankfully expedited by speedy player movement. Still, lengthier puzzles require a lot of running around to rearrange things, which sometimes wore on me. Despite these headaches, I was consistently impressed with how developer Croteam managed to concoct so many well-thought-out puzzle rooms, and solving them never stopped feeling like a well-earned achievement.

With several large islands filled with collectibles and optional puzzles, The Talos Principle II is an ambitious and ultimately well-made package with many social, artistic, and scientific ideas that I'll be thinking about for the foreseeable future, long after the solution to its final riddle has faded from memory. That enlightenment makes The Talos Principle II's challenges worth the effort. **BY MARCUS STEWART**

8.75

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Puzzle **PUBLISHER** Devolver Digital
DEVELOPER Croteam **RELEASE** November 2 **RATING** E10+

NICKELODEON ALL-STAR BRAWL 2

Nickelodeon All-Star Brawl 2 is a successful second attempt at the groundwork laid by its predecessor. Fair Play delivers a solid platform fighter that simultaneously improves the franchise's core mechanics and introduces side content to flesh out the overall package. **BY CHARLES HARTE**

8

PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1 to 4-Player Fighting (4-Player Online) **PUBLISHER** GameMill Entertainment
DEVELOPER Ludosity, Fair Play Labs **RELEASE** November 7 **RATING** E10+

STEAMWORLD BUILD

Sporting streamlined genre mechanics, intuitive controls, and charming visuals, many essential parts are in place. Unfortunately, despite a solid foundation, SteamWorld Build struggles to maintain an engaging experience throughout its campaign. **BY KENNETH SEWARD JR.**

7

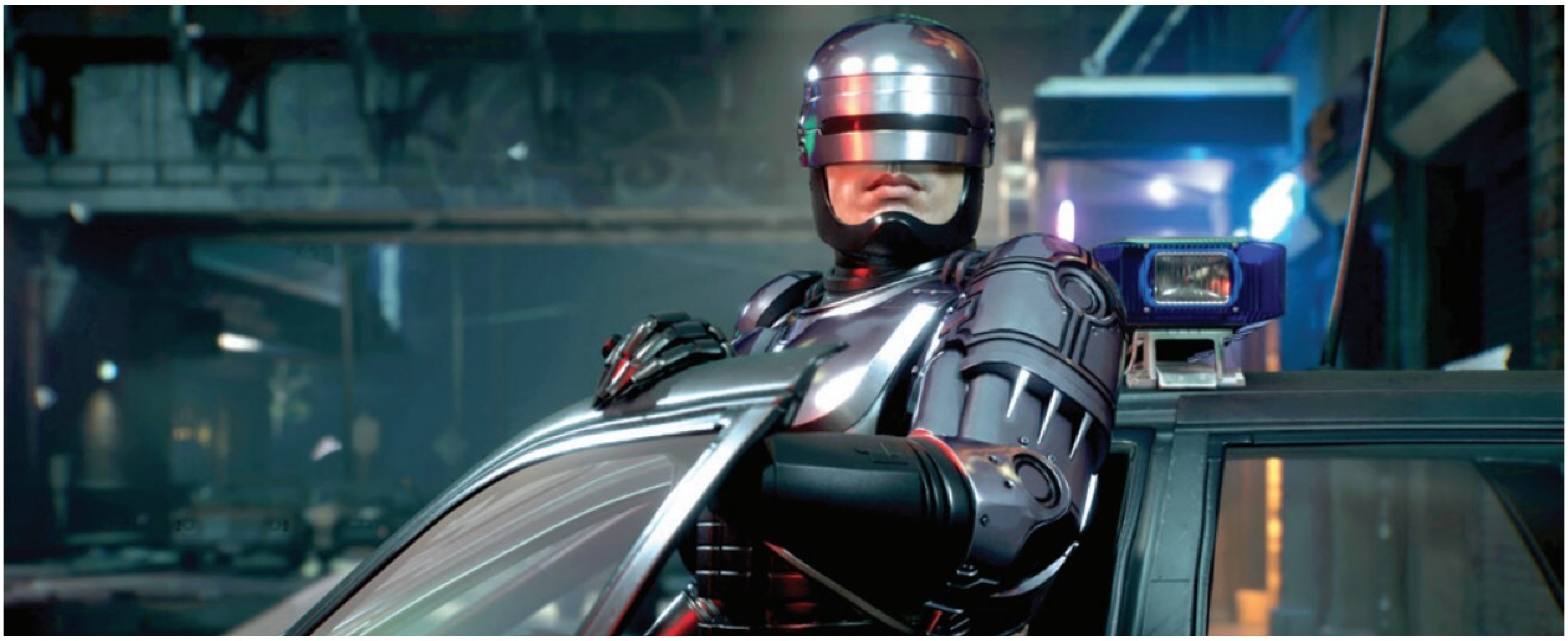
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PS4 • Xbox One • Switch • PC
STYLE 1-Player Simulation/Action **PUBLISHER** Thunderful Development
DEVELOPER Thunderful Publishing **RELEASE** December 1 **RATING** E10+

ROBOCOP: ROGUE CITY

If you're not a RoboCop fan, the adventure may feel dated or buggy compared to other shooters. But as a B-tier love letter to the tin man in blue, Rogue City is a nice return to the limelight for Alex Murphy. **BY MARCUS STEWART** ■

7.5

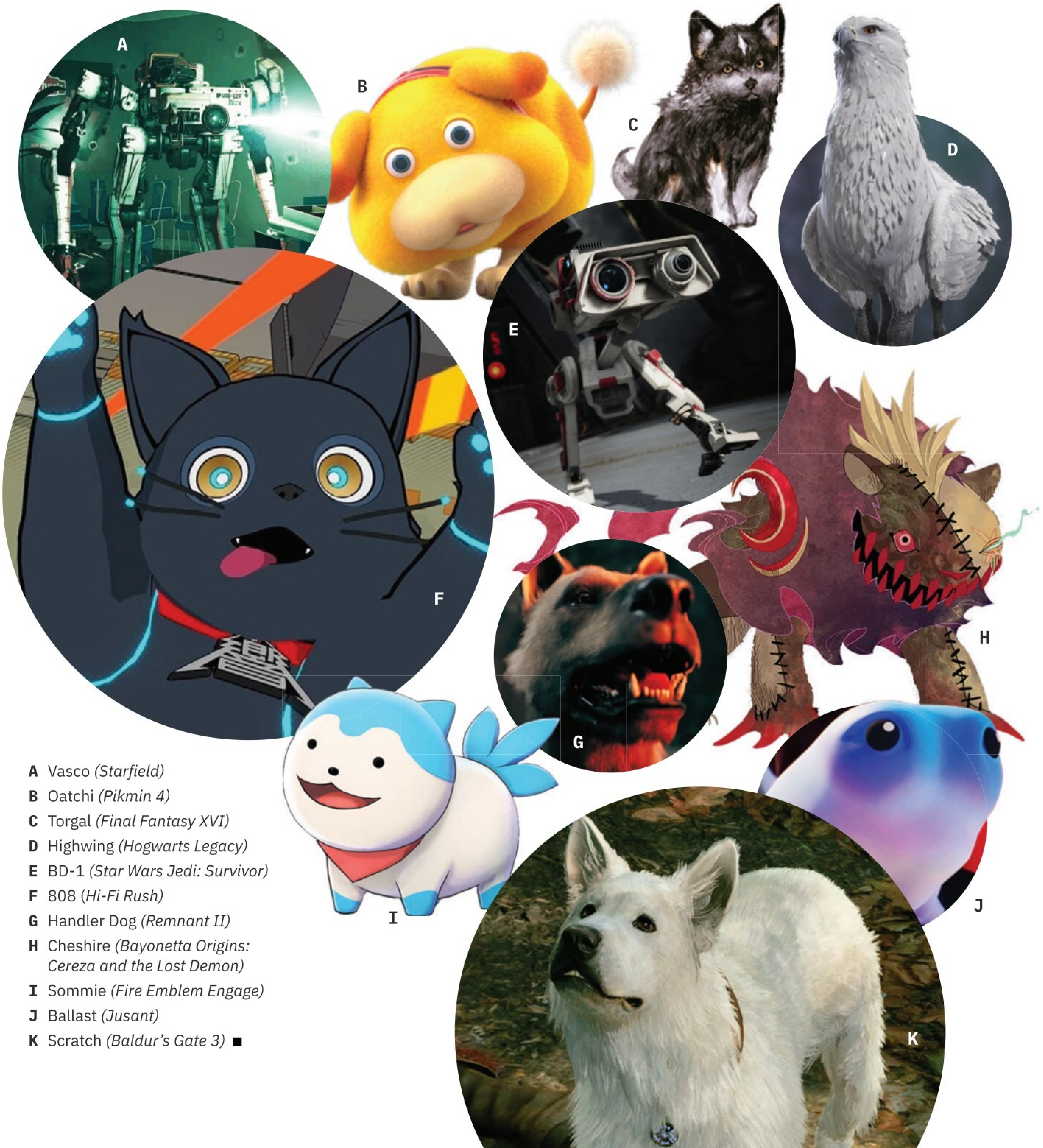
PLATFORM PS5 • Xbox Series X/S • PC **STYLE** 1-Player Shooter **PUBLISHER** Nacon **DEVELOPER** Teyon **RELEASE** November 2 **RATING** M



ONE LAST THING

BEST BOY

In a startling sequence of events, this year's Best Boy category was overwhelmed by staff and reader votes and features several nominated individuals who may not even qualify on a physiological level. We've been left with an 11-way tie, which we present to you now. All nominees inexplicably scored a 13/10.



A Vasco *(Starfield)*
B Oatchi *(Pikmin 4)*
C Torgal *(Final Fantasy XVI)*
D Highwing *(Hogwarts Legacy)*
E BD-1 *(Star Wars Jedi: Survivor)*
F 808 *(Hi-Fi Rush)*
G Handler Dog *(Remnant II)*
H Cheshire *(Bayonetta Origins: Cereza and the Lost Demon)*
I Sommie *(Fire Emblem Engage)*
J Ballast *(Jusant)*
K Scratch *(Baldur's Gate 3)* ■

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